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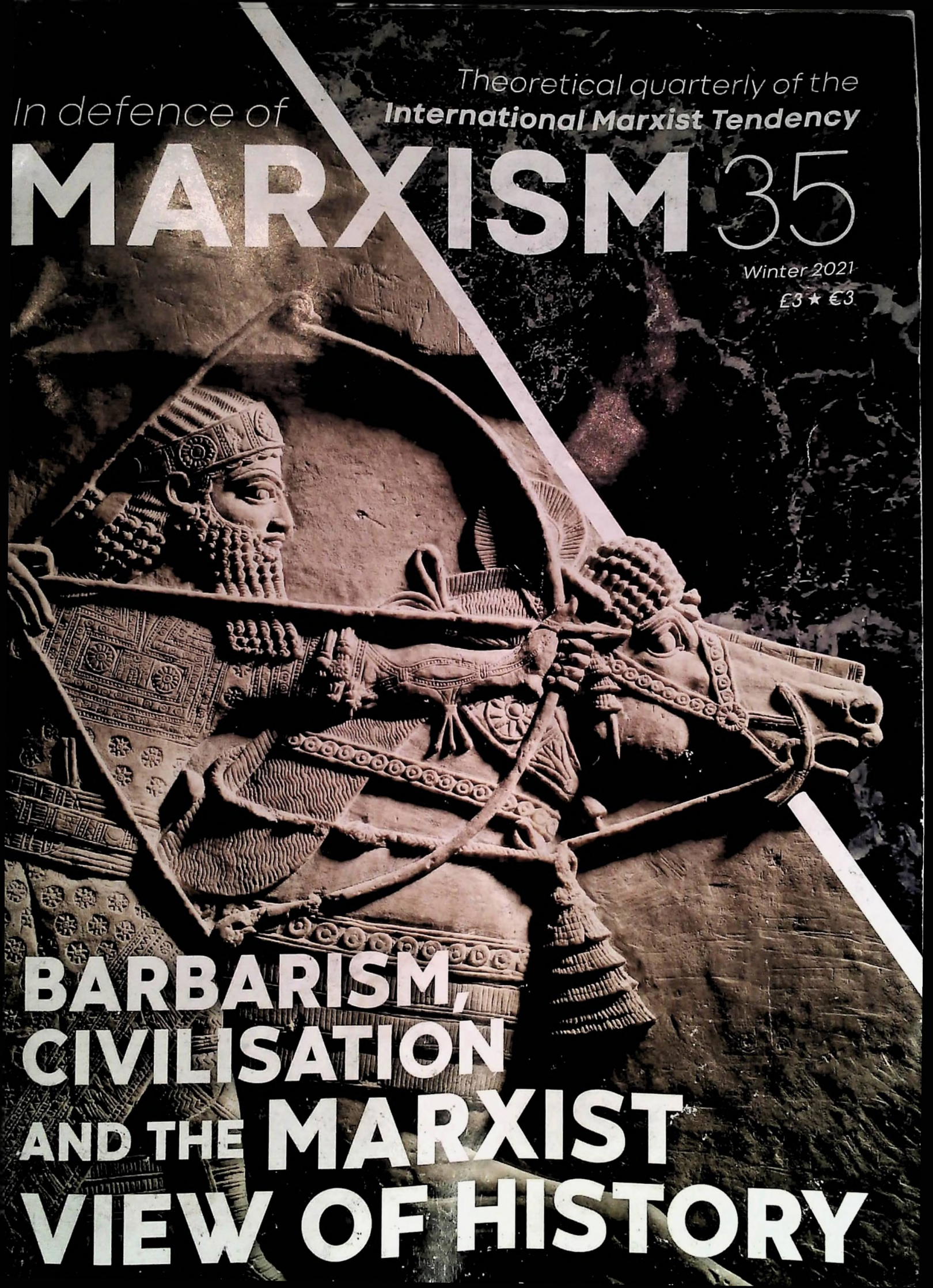

BARBARISM, CIVILISATION AND THE MARXIST VIEW OF HISTORY

In defence of
MARXISM

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p20

Civilisation, Barbarism and the Marxist view of History

The stagnation and crisis in capitalist society is being reflected in the pessimistic and reactionary ideas of modern bourgeois historians. Is there such a thing as historical progress, and can society move forward out of capitalism?

...he British Museum.

EDITORIAL: IN DEFENCE OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

BY ALAN WOODS

The success of the first issue of the new In Defence of Marxism magazine has surpassed even our most optimistic expectations. Our readers have given a particularly enthusiastic welcome to our emphasis on Marxist philosophy, and in particular to our polemic against the postmodernist craze.

As we pointed out, this so-called 'philosophy' is a many-headed Hydra. Its pernicious influence extends into many fields, and this polemic will continue so as to expose them, one by one. The present issue is dedicated to a particular field where the negative influence of postmodernism has had its most destructive consequences – the study of history.

We are pleased to present a new and thought-provoking study of the origins of class society by Josh Holroyd and Laurie O'Connel, together with a reprint of my article on Civilization and Barbarism, which was written in 2005 but which has not been readily available for some time.

POSTMODERNISM AND HISTORY

Self-styled philosophers of the postmodernist kind deny the possibility of finding any rational explanations for human history. It is alleged that there are no general laws, no objective factors that lie behind the conduct of individuals and determine their psychology and behaviour.

From this standpoint – the standpoint of extreme subjectivity – all history is determined by individuals acting according to their own free will. To attempt to find some inner logic in this turbulent and lawless sea would be as futile an exercise as to try to predict the precise momentum and position of an individual subatomic particle.

Despite a certain superficial attractiveness, this subjective approach to history is quite empty. It signifies a complete abandonment of any attempt to discover the laws whereby human society has evolved, since it denies the very existence of any such laws.

Now, if you come to think of it, this is a very extraordinary claim. Modern science teaches us that everything in the universe, from the smallest molecules and atoms to the biggest galaxies, are governed by laws, and it is precisely the discovery of such laws that is the main task and content of science.

Why should we accept that the entire universe, from the smallest particles to the most distant galaxies are determined, and the process that determines the evolution of all species, are governed by laws, and yet, for some strange reason, our own history is not?

That human beings are complex both on an individual and collective level hardly needs to be stated. After all, the human brain is the most complex organ known in the entire universe, and history is determined by an extremely complex interplay of many different minds, pursuing very different objectives.

Yet it is patently untrue that human behaviour cannot be understood. Engels pointed out long ago that, whereas it is impossible to predict when an individual man or woman will die, it is perfectly possible to make such a prediction in the aggregate, a fact out of which insurance companies make healthy profits.

In the same way, while it is not possible to determine with sufficient accuracy the position and momentum of a single subatomic particle, it is possible to make very precise predictions when dealing with a very large quantity of such particles. In dialectics, this is known as the transformation of quantity into quality.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

The Marxist method analyses the hidden mainsprings that underpin the development of human society from the earliest tribal societies up to the modern day. The way in which Marxism traces this winding road is called the materialist conception of history.

Very often attempts are made to discredit Marxism by resorting to a caricature of its method of historical analysis. There is nothing easier than erecting a straw man in order to knock it down again. The usual distortion is that Marx and Engels "reduced everything to economics." This absurd caricature has nothing to do with Marxism.

What Marxism does assert – and it is a proposition that surely nobody can deny – is that in the last analysis, the viability of a given socio-economic system will be determined by its ability to develop the means of production, that is to say, the material foundations upon which society, culture and civilization are built.

This scientific method enables us to understand history, not as a series of unconnected and unforeseen incidents, but rather as part of a clearly understood and interrelated process. It is a series of actions and reactions which cover politics, economics and the whole spectrum of social development.

To lay bare the complex dialectical relationship between all these phenomena is the task of historical materialism. Humankind constantly changes nature through labour, and in so doing, changes itself.

A REACTIONARY THEORY

The idea that history knows no laws, that it is merely a series of unconnected random events, is very convenient for the defenders of the present system, for whom capitalism (or something very like it) has always existed and always will exist.

But this comforting theory is not borne out by the known facts. Even the most superficial observer of history will immediately see the existence of definite patterns. Certain processes are constantly repeated: the rise and fall of certain socio-economic formations, societies and civilisations, economic crises, wars and revolutions.

Just as individuals are born, grow, reach maturity, and then enter into a phase of decline, ending in death, and just as in evolution, long periods of stasis are followed by sudden explosions that can impel development or lead to reversals and decline, so we see a similar process in the history of definite socio-economic formations throughout the course of history.

Slave society was succeeded by feudalism, which in turn was succeeded by capitalism, which has been the dominant socio-economic formation for the last three hundred years. Those centuries witnessed the most astonishing revolutions in science, industry, agriculture and technology ever seen. But this has now reached its limits. We are now living in just such a period of decline – the death agony of capitalism.

Some will doubtless see the entire course of history, to quote the words of the great historian Edward Gibbon as "little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." But at a deeper level, far more fundamental forces are exerting themselves.

Every successive socio-economic formation opens up the possibility for a greater development of the productive forces and therefore increases humanity's power over nature. In this way, the material basis is prepared for what Engels described as humanity's leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.

It is the task of socialism to realise the colossal potential for human development that has already been brought into existence by capitalism, but which it is powerless to bring to fruition. That is our task. And the prior condition for its realisation is the demolition of the existing order and the rebuilding of society on a new and higher foundation.

A most necessary step in this work of demolition is to demolish the rotten ideological foundations of the present order, and that is the task we are performing here. ■

Alan Woods
London, September 2021

Available from Wellred Books

THE ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY, PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE STATE

ENGELS

In this classic of Marxist theory, Friedrich Engels applies the Marxist view of history – *historical materialism* – to the birth of the state, family structures and property relations. He shows that, ultimately, the determining factor in these changes is the economic mode of production.

THE ORIGINS OF CLASS SOCIETY

For hundreds of thousands of years human beings have inhabited the Earth without private property, classes, states, or any of the other elements that make up class society as we know it. And yet we are taught that class division is a natural and universal condition of human existence. As **Josh Holroyd** and **Laurie O'Connel** explain in the following article, modern archaeology has produced a plethora of evidence attesting to the fact that the division of society into classes is a relatively recent development in human history. And just as it came into existence, Marxists understand it must eventually go out of existence.

Image: Public domain

When we look at the world today and see the billions of lives tormented by poverty, slavery and oppression, it is easy to assume that these horrors have accompanied humanity for its entire existence. After all, for thousands of years, kings, philosophers and priests have told us it has always been in the nature of human beings to suffer these evils. A serious study of our distant past, however, proves the opposite. For almost our whole existence as a species, we lived in communist bands of hunter-gatherers, without lords or masters of any kind.

For defenders of the present order, this simple fact poses a shattering rebuttal to their entire worldview. Many bourgeois historians and philosophers tend therefore to ignore the topic altogether. Those who do take up the gauntlet against our communistic past explain the origins of inequality as our greedy, oppressive nature asserting itself after thousands of years lying dormant. We should understand this for what it is: the false imposition of capitalist morality upon the whole of human history. In reality, as Marx remarks in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature."[1]

If we are to take a genuinely scientific approach to the development of society we must understand the birth of class society, not as some unhappy accident, nor as the awakening of some hitherto dormant, suprahistorical "human nature", but as a necessary stage in the continuous evolution of society, produced ultimately by perhaps the greatest revolution in humanity's productive forces ever known. And this is by no means an academic question. By understanding the birth of class society, we can grasp the real nature of its institutions, and discover the means by which we can overthrow them.

MAN AND NATURE

Marx explained that the most basic feature of all society is the relationship between human beings and nature. This is not some abstract ideal, but an entirely practical recognition of the fact that for humans to survive, we have always needed resources, which come from the world around us.

Our relationship with the natural world is mediated by labour, which we carry out socially. Through this process we extract resources and find sources of food and shelter. It has always been the case, despite the embarrassment of many modern archaeologists, that humans have had to labour to survive. As Marx explains:

> *"Labour, then as the creator of use-values, is the condition of human existence... an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature".*[2]

But while the fact that we labour remains unaltered throughout history, the *way* in which we labour, and the needs or desires we strive to satisfy, have changed a great deal. Over millions of years, humankind has developed tools and techniques in order to better achieve its ends. But the development of the means to satisfy even our most basic needs necessarily leads to the creation of new needs, new social relations and totally new ways of life. This constant interaction has decided many

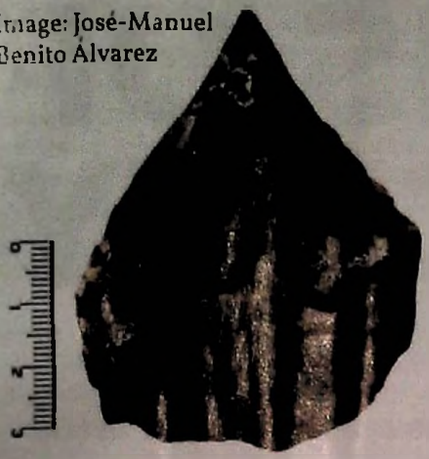


Image: José-Manuel Benito Álvarez

An Oldowan stone chopper

things for us – whether we move or stay in one place, whether we work all year round or in seasons – and has even affected our physiology and evolution. In every sense therefore, in changing our environment, we change ourselves. In this lies the basis for all human progress.

It was this fundamental principle of historical materialism that Engels summed up in his speech at Marx's graveside:

> *"Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained".*[3]

Marx writes in *Capital Vol. 1*: "The use and fabrication of instruments of labour, although existing in the germ among certain species of animals, is specifically characteristic of the human labour-process".[4] This can be observed archaeologically for as long as modern humans have been on this planet, and even before. Some of our earliest hominin ancestors, *Homo habilis* and *Homo ergaster*, crafted stone tools. The Oldowan tool complex, discovered at the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, dates back up to 2.6 million years. Throughout the Paleolithic period (covering roughly up to 10,000 BC), we see the emergence of one new tool complex after another – Achulean, Mousterian, Chatelperronian, etc. We can even trace, alongside the production of these tools, the development of consciousness and complex thought. Generally, each tool complex is more symmetrical and requires more forward planning than the last, driving the development of the brain of modern humans to new heights.

It is a further confirmation of the materialist method that even non-Marxist archaeologists are forced to periodise the past in terms of the material culture that prevailed in each age. It is not for nothing that we talk of the Paleolithic (from the Ancient Greek for "old stone"), Neolithic ("new stone"), Bronze Age etc. These denominations all refer to the materials used to make the tools upon which production depended at the time. As Marx notes in *Capital Vol. 1*:

> *"Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic forms of society, as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals. It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economic epochs. Instruments of labour not only supply a standard of the degree of development to which human labour has attained, but they are also indicators of the social conditions under which that labour is carried on."*[5]

This simple but revolutionary idea is by no means accepted throughout the academic establishment. Indeed, this most basic principle of historical materialism meets in the university faculty the same horror and indignation as Darwin's theory of natural selection met in Victorian drawing rooms.

The result is that modern academia stands a long way behind even the Ancient Greek philosophers in its understanding of society. Both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged that there was a material basis for their leisure time. As Aristotle writes in his *Metaphysics*, theoretical arts were developed in places where men had plenty of free time. "Thus the mathematical sciences originated in the neighbourhood of Egypt, because there the priestly class was allowed leisure."[6] This necessarily presupposes a certain degree of development in the productivity of labour, and with it a reorganisation of the structure of society itself. It is to the early beginnings of this development that we will now turn.

PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM

Archaeologists have found very little evidence of significant inequality prior to the Neolithic period, which began a little under 12,000 years ago. Evidence gathered from Paleolithic sites all over the world paints a picture of small, overwhelmingly mobile societies, reliant on hunting, fishing and foraging for survival, in which hardly any differences in wealth or status can be detected from goods buried with the dead.

Of course, we will never be able to say exactly how prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies looked in detail. But anthropological studies of existing hunter-gatherer societies like the !Kung people of the Kalahari desert offer a glimpse of what they may have been like. The anthropologist Richard Leaky writes:

> *"[T]he !Kung have no chiefs and no leaders... no-one gives orders or takes them... sharing deeply pervades the values of the !Kung foragers just as the principle of profit and rationality is central to the capitalist ethic."*[7]

This outlook is well attested in hunter-gatherer communities across the world and fits perfectly with the evidence provided by Paleolithic sites. But the egalitarianism of our prehistoric past was not a purely cultural or moral phenomenon; at root, it came from the fact that there was, and could be, no private property beyond the possession of tools and other personal items. These groups were successful, skilled hunter-gatherers, but they lived day to day or year to year, not accumulating any significant surplus. Accordingly, there was no concept of land ownership or inheritance.

This can be seen most clearly in the practices of the Aborigines of the Central Australian desert, widely considered one of the oldest continuous cultures on Earth, spanning as far back as 50,000 years. In the 1960s, the anthropologist Richard Gould spent time living with hunter-gatherers at the centre of the Australian landmass. He noted that all food brought back to camp was "meticulously shared between all members of the group, even when it was no more than a small lizard"[8]. Based on the excavation of local rock shelters, Gould hypothesised that the inhabitants of this region had lived in this way since the first occupation of the region by *Homo sapiens*. The principle behind this extreme, even absolute, form of communism is not hard to discover: scarcity, ultimately caused by the relatively low stage of development of the productive forces and the low level of control over the natural environment. While other hunter-gatherer societies did not face such harsh conditions, the same principle can be seen in operation all over the Paleolithic world.

WOMEN IN PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM (IN DEFENCE OF ENGELS)

Another feature of the egalitarian character of paleolithic society is the equal position of women. As Friedrich Engels writes in his masterpiece, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

> *"One of the most absurd notions taken over from eighteenth-century enlightenment is that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man. Among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and middle stages, and to a certain extent of the upper stage*

> "[T]he egalitarianism of our prehistoric past was not a purely cultural or moral phenomenon; at root, it came from the fact that there was, and could be, no private property beyond the possession of tools and other personal items."

also, the position of women is not only free, but honorable."[9]

Basing himself on the most recent anthropological studies of the time, in particular Henry Lewis Morgan's study of the Iroquois, Engels put forward the revolutionary idea that the systematic oppression of women is in fact a relatively recent development in the history of our species. Analysing not only Iroquois society but also the ancient Athenians, Romans and Germans, he argued that the "historic defeat of the female sex" had an economic foundation: the private ownership of the means of production, in particular the land and herds, and its accumulation in the hands of men.

Further, if women's oppression had a beginning, Engels concluded, it must therefore have an end. The establishment of a communist society, without private property and class exploitation, would re-establish the freedom and equality of men and women on a higher level than ever before. It is this perspective that has armed and inspired Marxists in the fight for women's liberation ever since.

However, this revolutionary insight has been dismissed not only by defenders of the present system but even by feminist theorists, who claim that Engels' interpretation of primitive communist society is nothing but a "comforting myth". In recent years, even professedly "Marxist" academics have joined these attacks on the basis of Engels' theory. Christophe Darmangeat of the University of Paris, for example, argues, "the male monopoly over hunting and weapons has everywhere given men a position of strength relative to women", meaning that "women were everywhere placed in such a situation where they could be reduced to the role of mere instruments in men's strategies."[10]

What is remarkable about this argument is that, whilst purporting to correct Engels on the basis of more modern research, it manages to repeat exactly the same false assumption that Engels demolished over 100 years ago. Darmangeat's first premise is that hunting and weapons were always a male monopoly. In order for this thesis to be valid, it must have a universal application, i.e. it must signify that this alleged monopoly has existed always and everywhere, with no exceptions. But such an assertion cannot be made, since it is contradicted by most modern research, including in hunter-gatherer communities that continue to exist. For example, in the Agta of the Philippines,[11] women are known to practice weapon-assisted hunting. Further back in time, the picture becomes even more complex, with the recent discovery of hunting gear in the grave of a young adult female in the Andes,[12] dated to around 7,000 BC, and depictions of women hunting with spears in the earliest cave paintings in Burzahom, India, dated to around 6,000 BC.[13] However, even if we accept that hunting has commonly been a male preserve, Darmangeat's argument contains a much more pernicious falsehood: the assumption that wherever this is the case women are reduced to "mere instruments".

No Marxist would deny that there exist natural differences between men and women, and that therefore some form of division of labour has existed between the sexes in all societies. The fact that women carry and give birth to children is one obvious example of this. Depending on a community's natural surroundings and resources, this may have meant that men ranged further from the camp, for example participating in hunting expeditions, while women tended to focus on gathering resources closer to home, bringing children along with them. Such a division of labour was observed amongst the !Kung, for example.[14] The crucial point however is that in such societies, occupying a different position in the division of labour at this early stage cannot be presented as proof of oppression or exploitation by another section of society. On the contrary, all the available evidence points to the contrary.

Referring to the !Kung, Patricia Draper writes:

> *"Men and women of the foraging groups are egalitarian in their dealings with each other. They are typically found in mixed-sex groups in the camp settings, although their work is usually done in same-sex groups. Women do not show deference to men. Living in small bands without well-developed leadership roles, they arrive at decisions by a consensus in which women participate along with men."*[15]

The women described here could hardly be described as anyone's "instruments". Far from it. In many cases, such as that of the !Kung, plants gathered by women "contribute as much as 80% of the community's daily food intake", and "unlike male hunters, female foragers retain control over the final distribution of the foods they have collected".[16] The anthropologist Chris Knight argues that, in many hunter-gatherer societies, "a young man will never acquire permanent sexual rights in the woman he regularly visits. Instead, he must continuously earn approval by surrendering all his hunted meat to his mother-in-law for her to distribute as she pleases."[17] Again, who is controlling whom here?

Nor does the possession of weapons, or greater strength, necessarily lead to violence against women. One study in 1989 found that the traditional, nomadic or semi-nomadic San were "one of only six societies in the world where domestic violence was almost unheard of".[18] This is an absolutely astonishing fact when one considers the permanent pandemic of violence against women that claims tens of thousands of lives every year across the world.

The image of men as the dominant "providers" and women as subordinate "housewives" is totally anachronistic – a conception of prehistory taken straight out of The Flintstones. The persistence of this idea has nothing to do with science or historical research. It is merely a reflection of the fact that those who peddle this myth are incapable of rising above the notions and prejudices of present day class society. And if you accept the prejudices of class society then you must ultimately accept its conclusions, rejecting the possibility not only of equality between men and women, but of the establishment of a more equal society in general. That is to say, this allegedly scientific argument ultimately boils down to just one thing: the permanent existence of class society forever and ever, amen.

THE BEGINNINGS OF CULTIVATION

It is sometimes asked how people could have gone from this seemingly utopian primitive communist society to one where the vast majority of people were oppressed. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins even coined the term, "the original affluent society", based on his own study of hunter-gatherer groups, which concluded that each adult would only

have had to work three to five hours a day to gather enough resources. While this is likely an exaggeration, based on too narrow a definition of work, it does call into question the idea that hunter-gatherer societies were permanently on the edge of starvation. But just as we should reject the Hobbesian myth of life as always "nasty, brutish and short" prior to its liberation by the civilised repression of the state, we should also be wary of bending the stick too far in the other direction.

Paleolithic society did not exist in some Edenic state of health and abundance. Ice Age populations were of necessity small, with little certainty and control over the conditions of their existence. Most would have consumed their food within hours or days, suggesting only a very limited surplus product, if any at all. Most hunter-gatherer groups had a low life expectancy, as well as a low birth rate. Even after the last Ice Age ended, around 9,700 BC, scarcity and hardship continued to be a challenge faced by hunter-gatherer communities. To give just one example, at the site of Mahadaha in India, dated to as late as 4,000 BC, the estimated age of death of all of the 13 skeletons found was between 19 and 28, but "probably much closer to 19"[19]. None were over 50. Then, as now, the driver of development was the struggle for the means to survive and thrive in the face of adversity: "the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life"[20].

Just as the need to improve the way people gathered resources encouraged the development of stone tools, it also drove human beings to look for more diverse and reliable food sources. This process would take on a life of its own as the global climate began to warm roughly 20,000 years ago. In this period, rising temperatures and moisture levels, along with the retreating ice sheets, opened up entire regions for human beings and greatly increased the quantity and variety of available resources. Stimulated by their changing environment, hunter-gatherers rapidly developed new, more sophisticated means of acquiring these resources, producing an explosion in humanity's productive forces.

Older stone tools like hand-axes were replaced by "microliths", much smaller stone tools such as drills and arrowheads.[21] Bones were fashioned into fine needles for stitching together different types of fur, creating the warm, layered clothing that humans used to colonise the frozen wilds of Siberia.[22] Harpoons were carved from reindeer antlers in order to exploit the greater availability of fish.[23] Wicker cages were crafted to catch eels.[24] This was a qualitative, as well as quantitative, leap in the productivity and scope of human labour.

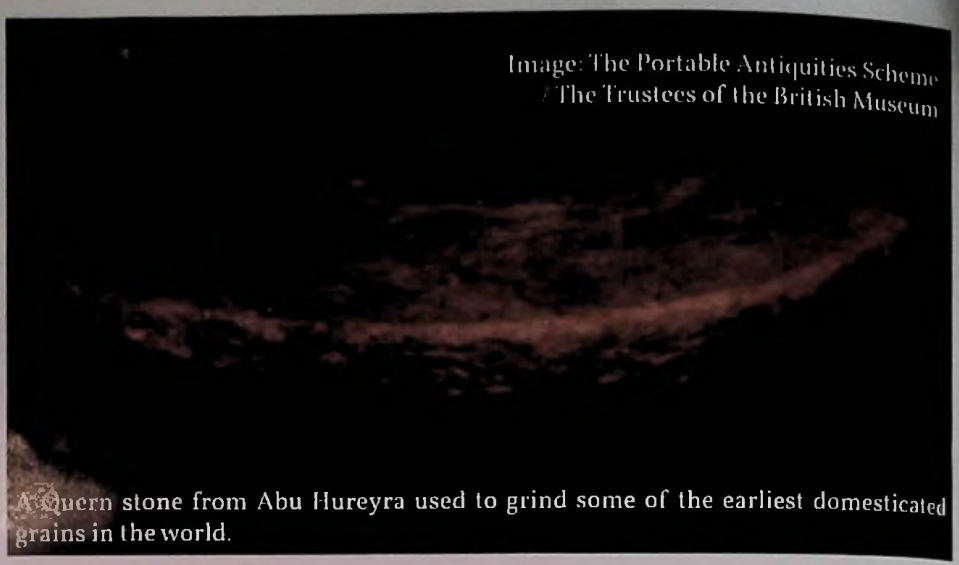


Image: The Portable Antiquities Scheme / The Trustees of the British Museum

A quern stone from Abu Hureyra used to grind some of the earliest domesticated grains in the world.

Aside from hunting and fishing, people also took advantage of the wild plant foods that began to flourish in the warmer and wetter climate. The earliest known harvesting of wild grasses dates as far back as the last Ice Age, around 21,000 BC, at Ohalo in modern Israel. By around 14,000 BC, wild emmer wheat, einkorn and barley were being cultivated across the region. This development, which at the time may have appeared to be only a small gain, marks the early beginnings of a process that would irreversibly change humanity's relationship with the natural world, and with it, human life itself.

The first cultivation of cereals and other plants was still a long way from the agricultural production of the Neolithic period. In most places it would have been much closer to a form of "wild gardening", whereby the cultivators would regularly visit sites where such plants were known to grow so they could gather what was available. But even through this seemingly passive form of gathering, human beings were actively transforming nature in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Many of the plants and animals on which we rely as staples today have not always existed. Maize, beans, squash, staple cereal crops, and even pigs, sheep and cattle as we know them today evolved due to human intervention in nature many thousands of years ago. For example, the wild grasses that were cultivated in places like Ohalo possessed much smaller grains than the wheat we consume today. The discovery of larger-than-average grains at Jerf el Ahmar in modern Syria suggests that, as far back as 13,000 BC, people were deliberately resowing the grasses with larger grains in order to improve productivity.[25]

Even more importantly, the ears of these ancient grasses would break off and disperse spontaneously at varying times, increasing their chances of successful propagation. But what is good for the grass is not necessarily good for the gatherer. A great proportion of the potential crop would be lost before the harvester even arrived. Modern cereal crops have "non-disarticulating rachis", which means that the ears will stay put until someone comes to harvest them. This biological transformation was the product of the intervention and innovation of human beings. Under the right conditions, the potential selective pressure created by deliberate improvements in the gatherers' technique would be realised in the evolution of new species of wheat and barley, itself a dramatic development of the productive forces.

THE NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION

Alongside the increasing resources and improved tools and techniques of this period, the first ever settlements started to appear. These would likely have first been semi-permanent or seasonal camps that people returned to more and more regularly, such as Starr Carr in Britain (dated from roughly 9,000 BC).[26] But eventually this period would witness the first permanent villages in the world. An early example of this can be found at the "Natufian" site of 'Ain Mallaha in the Levant, (dated from roughly 12,500 BC), where people settled permanently, relying on the hunting of gazelle along with the cultivation of wild wheat and barley.[27]

However, even in the highest stages of the Epipaleolithic (literally "late old stone" age), permanent settlements were very rare, and can be found only at sites with exceptionally favourable natural conditions, such as 'Ain Mallaha, or the salmon runs at Poverty Point in the Pacific Northwest. At this stage it was very difficult and in some cases impossible to create similar conditions elsewhere, and so to an extent the location of settlements and means of subsistence ultimately remained passively determined by nature. But the developments taking place at this time were preparing the way for a dramatic transformation, in which the exception would become the rule.

Often in history [illegible] have catalysed the deep processes [illegible] developing

under the surface. These crises can be both internal and external. Prior to the development of agriculture in the Near East, the world got significantly colder, in a return to glacial conditions known as the Younger Dryas (roughly 11,000 – 9,700 BC). As herd migrations and the appearance of wild grasses were disrupted, the established way of life for many people became impossible. Some would certainly have perished while many would have had to return to a more mobile way of life. But the preceding development, which had been gradually building up over thousands of years, was not lost.

As people abandoned dying settlements they took harvested grains with them and sowed them in completely new locations. The creation of new plots and the greater reliance that certain communities placed on the cultivation of cereal crops using flint sickles is thought to have accelerated the process of natural and artificial selection that eventually gave birth to fully domesticated wheat,[28] and with it the means of overcoming the limitations of the old hunter-gatherer settlements. We can see this process clearly at Abu Hureyra, in modern Syria, where people responded to the cooling climate by the intensive cultivation of wild rye, resulting in the oldest domesticated cereal grain yet found, dated to roughly 10,500 BC.[29]

From roughly 9,500 BC, people in the Levant and Southeastern Turkey returned to settled life, but this time on a qualitatively higher level, based on domesticated cereals and animals such as sheep and goats, which had also been transformed by the conscious intervention of human hunters turned shepherds. By roughly 8,000 BC, this new way of life had spread across the Near East and would soon begin to be adopted in Europe and South Asia. Settled agriculture also arose independently elsewhere, including China, several parts of Africa and the Americas. The Marxist archaeologist, V. Gordon Childe, referred to this process as the "Neolithic Revolution".

For bourgeois academics, the description of anything as a "revolution" sounds far too Marxist for an archaeology textbook. Instead, they argue that domestication and the development of agriculture should be referred to as the "Neolithic transition", because it was a process which developed over a long period of time. This is a childish way of understanding history. The Cambrian explosion (a period of rapid diversification of complex, multicellular animal life) took place over ten million years but it was still explosive compared to the billions of years of incredibly slow evolution that preceded it. The Neolithic Revolution was a similarly massive and rapid transformation from *Homo sapiens* has existed for around 300,000 years, but these developments took place over only a few thousand years and were totally earth-shattering, giving birth to a new way of life, a new mode of production, and with it a new stage in the history of the human race.

THE ROLE OF IDEAS

Another objection to the 'traditional' portrayal of the Neolithic Revolution attacks its materialistic conclusions. Looking back at these processes from a distance of over 10,000 years, it is easy to see the profound impact that developments in human labour and technique had on both nature and society. But just as the notion of a Neolithic "Revolution" smells too much of Marxism for today's academic establishment, this confirmation of the most basic ideas of historical materialism is too much for some 'scientific' minds to bear. For instance, Anthony Giddens, the sociologist behind Tony Blair's "Third Way", argues that because settlement predates the arrival of agriculture in a few places, the development of the productive forces cannot be considered the determining factor in the Neolithic Revolution, and history in general. Giddens writes:

> *"Human social life neither begins nor ends in production. When Mumford calls man a 'mindmaking, self-mastering, and self-designing animal', and when Frankel sees in human life a 'search for meaning', they are closer to supplying the basis for a philosophical anthropology of human culture than Marx was."*[30]

The relatively recently discovered site at Göbekli Tepe in south east Anatolia, modern Turkey, has lately been claimed to provide more evidence for this idealist conception of history. The site is dated to 9,600 BC, at the very beginning of the Neolithic period, and features grand stone altars that clearly suggest that there was a degree of specialisation and surplus labour-time to devote to the site's construction. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that this site was in use all year round. However, the abundance of wild animal bones and the absence of domesticates suggests the people who built this "temple" were hunter-gatherers. This remarkable discovery has provoked an effusion of triumphant articles declaring the death of materialism. Rather than settling because of the development of agriculture, or anything else related to production, it has been argued that people first settled for religious purposes and then developed agriculture as a means of feeding the congregation. "I think what we are learning is that civilisation is a product of the human mind",[31] announced the lead archaeologist at the site, Klaus Schmidt.

But the insight that civilisation is a "product of the mind" is not nearly as profound as its author might think. The steam engine was also a product of the mind, as was the factory system. The flint sickle was a product of the mind. If even the most militant materialist makes himself a meal, he does so because he had the idea of doing it. But this tells us absolutely nothing beyond the uncontroversial fact that all of these things have been created by conscious human beings.

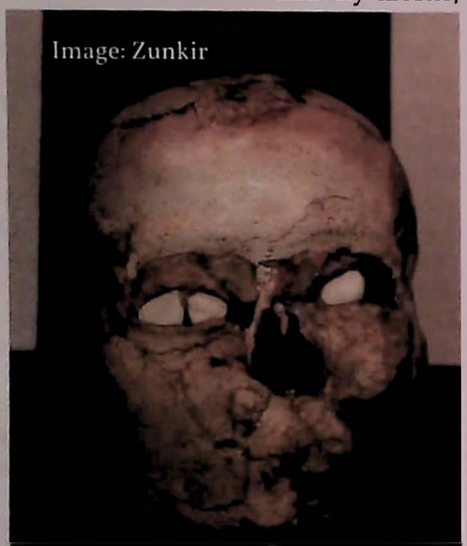
As Engels put it, "Everything which sets men in motion must go through their minds; but what form it will take in the mind will depend very much upon the circumstances."[32] It is necessary to ask *why* the people who built Göbekli Tepe chose to build such a large and permanent place of worship in the first place, and then why they chose to turn to the cultivation of wheat to sustain themselves. Ritual activity was important throughout the Paleolithic and beyond as a means of understanding and controlling the natural world, and the harvesting of wild wheat dates back as long as 23,000 years, so why did a similar development not occur during the last Ice Age? The explanation for this can ultimately only be found in the development of the productive forces: humanity's relationship with nature, mediated through labour, its instruments, organisation and technique.

The means for the permanent cultivation of domesticated crops and animals had been prepared within the old hunter-gatherer society over thousands of years prior to the construction of Göbekli Tepe. As noted above, domesticated rye grains have been traced back as far as 10,500 BC. Further, more recent excavations at the site have revealed evidence of both domestic buildings[33] and the consumption of wild grains,[34] which had been missed or ignored by Schmidt's idealist approach. This means that Göbekli Tepe was not just a temple: it was a settlement, which eventually turned to agriculture as a means of overcoming the limitations of hunter-gatherer production. This only reinforces the conclusion that the fascinating altars and religious practices of the people that lived there had a material base. Like the people of Tell Abu Hureyra, who turned to the intensive cultivation of rye in the face of adversity, the culture that created Göbekli Tepe marks a crucial point in the Neolithic Revolution, wherein the necessity of a new form of social organisation is reflected in the conscious actions of individuals. Such is the course of any genuine social revolution. The ideas, desires and religious notions of those individuals did not spring passively and directly from their tools – they were the product of the minds of real, living, human beings – and would undoubtedly have had a decisive effect on the form this process took. But the real content of this

process was still provided by the changes taking place in their environment, their society, and the labour upon which it was founded: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."[35]

A NEW WORLD

Marx writes in *Capital*: "Epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by strict and abstract lines of demarcation than are geological epochs."[36] In this vein, the earliest villages of the Neolithic period would have appeared to be very similar to some of the hunter-gatherer settlements that had emerged at the very end of the Paleolithic. In some cases, Neolithic communities could well have been relatively mobile,



A Jericho plastered skull.

settling temporarily to cultivate a plot of land, only to move on to a fresh plot after a few seasons had exhausted the soil, as was observed amongst the Iroquois by Morgan. Hunting, fishing and gathering would have persisted alongside the cultivation of grain. It would take several hundred years before the fundamental changes that were being wrought upon society would become obvious.

One such change was a marked increase in the size and number of settlements. The average Natufian settlement is thought to have housed between 100 and 150 people: a considerable number by hunter-gatherer standards, but tiny in comparison to the Neolithic settlements that would emerge from 9,500 BC onwards. Even a small Neolithic village would tend to house around 250 people[37], roughly double the Natufian average. Jericho, perhaps the oldest settlement still in existence, boasted a population of up to 1,000 at roughly 9,000 BC, only a few hundred years after the beginning of the Neolithic. This could only have been achieved on the basis of a dramatic leap in the productive forces.

Settled agriculture not only favoured greater concentrations of people, but also fostered population growth overall. This reproductive advantage was substantially offset by the higher rates of child mortality and generally lower life expectancy of Neolithic farmers, caused by a narrower diet and the explosion of previously unknown diseases: the darker side of a sedentary life which places sometimes thousands of people and animals in close proximity. However, in spite of the problems that came with the new settled way of life, the higher birth rate continued to produce both a greater size and spread of farming settlements at the expense of nomadic hunter-gatherer groups. In Britain, continental migrants are thought to have introduced farming from roughly 4,000 BC, replacing the old way of life over the entire island in the space of 2,000 years,[38] a very short period by prehistoric standards.

With the changed mode of production of material life, new ideological and religious forms also took shape. One example of this is the rise of what are interpreted to be ancestor cults, such as the plastered skulls found at Jericho and the burial of deceased relatives in the floors of houses.[39] The notion that one's ancestors remain with the family, sometimes literally inside the house, and protect their living relatives, is well attested in Chinese culture from very ancient times as well. This would fit well with the continuity and intended permanence of the household, working the same lands.

The transition to settled agriculture also began to affect the division of labour within the family. A dramatically higher birth rate would have meant that women spent more time carrying, delivering and caring for children, meaning they could have been less available for field work. Evidence from a number of Neolithic sites suggests that in many places, this development, combined with the more intensive labour and constant supervision required for the fields and flocks, resulted in a more rigid division of responsibilities within the family.

As cereal cultivation becomes increasingly important, so too does the processing of wheat and barley. At Tell Abu-Hureyra, mentioned above, female skeletons had arthritis in their toes because they spent hours kneeling, rocking backwards and forwards and using their body weight to grind grains into flour.[40] A similar division of labour was discovered at a Neolithic site in China, dated to 5,000-6,000 BC, where male burials tended to include "stone agricultural and hunting implements", while female graves "lack these sorts of artefacts, but include tools for grinding grain".[41] This evidence, along with other studies have led many anthropologists to draw a link between the rise of settled agriculture, and the tendency of women to perform "domestic labour" in the home.

This "domestic labour" was by no means secondary or ancillary to the labour of men, however. Neolithic houses are often found with their own areas for weaving. Tool-making, though usually pictured as 'men's work', also took place around the home or village, and in many cases fell to the women of the household. Indeed, anthropological studies of the Konso, a largely agricultural ethnic group in Ethiopia whose hide-workers are some of the last people in the world to use flint-knapped tools on a mass scale, indicates that women in these communities are usually the tool-makers.[42] The Neolithic household was as much a workshop as a home, and evidence suggests that women were increasingly found at the heart of it.

The shift in the division of labour within the family was neither automatic nor absolute. There is plenty of evidence of societies in which men and women perform roughly equal quantities of work inside and outside the household, such as the extremely important Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük[43] in modern Turkey. There have also been many societies in which agriculture tended to be carried out by women instead of men, like the Iroquois documented by Morgan. It would therefore be overly simplistic and false to draw an automatic and immediate link between agriculture in general and the tendency of women to work more in the home. Further, we cannot interpret these changes in the division of labour within the family as solid evidence of the systematic oppression of women and patriarchy that would become the hallmark of all 'civilised' peoples later on. While it appears that women were more likely to work at home, their work was highly valued in their society and they enjoyed the same status as men. Many Neolithic burial grounds have been found that contain an equal number of male and female bodies, with no noticeable distinction of wealth or status between them, such as Midhowe Cairn in Orkney.[44]

What Tell Abu-Hureyra and other Neolithic sites indicate is the early, embryonic appearance of new relations within Neolithic society, which tended to place women more regularly in the home. On its own, this shift in the division of labour did not place women in a dependent or oppressed state, but in the course of further development, as the labour and supervision involved in agricultural production became increasingly intense, this tendency would become more pronounced, eventually laying the foundations for an even sharper shift in the

relations between men and women. But this would not take place during the Neolithic itself; it would require the birth of class society before these developments would be transformed into the systematic oppression of women.

THE VILLAGE COMMUNE

Despite the embryonic signs of inequality found in the Neolithic period, social relations were still communistic in nature: we see little to no evidence of private property, class exploitation or inherited wealth. Engels outlines the social structures of these classless societies in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

> *"No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits – and everything takes its orderly course...the household is maintained by a number of families in common, and is communistic, the land belongs to the tribe, only the small gardens are allotted provisionally to the households – yet there is no need for even a trace of our complicated administrative apparatus with all its ramifications. There cannot be any poor or needy – the communal household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are equal and free – the women included. There is no place yet for slaves, nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of other tribes.'*[45]

Engels, following Morgan, termed this stage in the development of human society "barbarism", which began with the development of agriculture, the domestication of animals, and pottery. For people living in these early farming communities, who retained the morality and cultural norms of the commune, any other way of life must have been unthinkable.

One important piece of evidence that points towards this is the emergence of group burials, where all individuals are buried communally with no regard to social distinction or status. Midhowe Cairn in Orkney, discussed above, has at least 25 individuals buried together. A resource-intensive monument like this, with multiple, separate stone chambers, does not reflect a lack of respect for the individuals buried within. It fits the morality of a society that was itself communal.

Even very large Neolithic settlements were organised on a communal basis. Çatalhöyük, mentioned above, was home to an estimated 10,000 people at its height, around 7,000 BC. It consisted of closely packed houses, in which each household operated as an individual unit, with burials beneath the floors rather than in common graveyards. But despite this relative household independence, houses showed little difference in size, suggesting very little if any differences in wealth or status.

The egalitarian nature of the Neolithic commune has led some to question the link between the Neolithic Revolution, and the rise of class society. Many Neolithic communities lasted for thousands of years without forced labour, taxation, or even very much inequality, so to what degree can we say the rise of class society was inevitable, or inherent in Neolithic production? Marx famously explained that development within a mode of production necessarily brings about the conditions for its overthrow by new relations:

> *"No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society."*[46]

The inevitability of class society lies in the fact that the development of Neolithic production itself prepared the very conditions upon which the rise of class society was based: the increasingly complex division of labour in society, and most important of all, the growth of the surplus product. We will focus largely on how this took place in the Near East. No argument is made here that every development that took place in this region is an exhaustive model for the rise of all class societies, but in setting out the process in all its phases in one region, we hope to bring out its most basic elements.

THE GROWTH OF THE SURPLUS

As the Neolithic commune continued to develop, and grew both in size and productive capacity, there were more resources to be organised and more complex decisions to be made. Indeed the whole history of the Neolithic could be summed up in the question, "What to do with the surplus?"

One way in which Neolithic communities organised their surplus product was to store it for the future. The villages of the Neolithic, such as Jerf el Ahmar in Syria[47], generally held storage facilities managed and controlled by the whole community. The surplus also took the form of a greater quantity of labour-time that could be devoted to tasks other than subsistence. The inhabitants of Jericho, for example, channelled their surplus time and energy into carrying out massive communal projects such as the great tower and wall,[48] which have been dated to as early as 8,000 BC. The growth of the surplus also increased trade between the largely self-sufficient Neolithic communes, which began to lay the basis for a regional division of labour, and the interdependence of settlements at a later stage.[49]

The most significant response to the growth of surplus production was the

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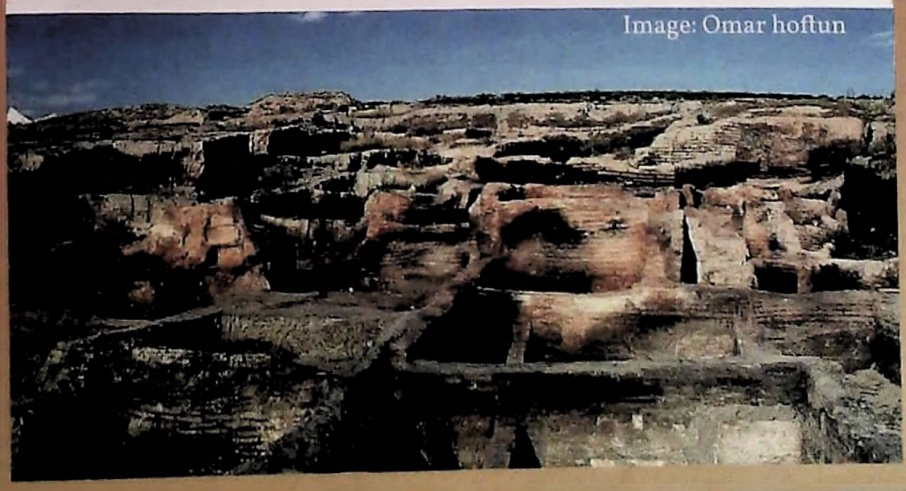

Image: Omar hoftun

emergence of a new social division between mental and physical labour: the hand and the head. The rising productivity of labour allowed for the liberation of a small section of society from the demands of physical labour in the fields. This development, the final product of the Neolithic, would provide the basis for the first class societies in history. Its history is therefore of special importance.

From around 7,000 BC, Neolithic peoples in the Near East began to move into other, less hospitable but more fertile areas, such as Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), where the first states would eventually develop. This raises the question of the role of the environment in historical development. Evidently, in the "metabolism between man and nature" our natural environment is extremely important. In prehistoric society, much of humanity's technological and social development appears as a response to external, environmental pressures. However, this is only part of the story, in which ultimately the activity of human beings plays the starring role.

It is often said that civilisation, or class society, was the product of the fertile soils surrounding the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, Yellow River, or Indus. But the productivity of the Mesopotamian soil would remain nothing more than an empty possibility so long as human beings lacked the means to cultivate it. In 7,000-6,000 BC, much of Lower Mesopotamia was rendered inhospitable by the waterlogged marshes that covered it. Further, the lack of important materials such as wood and (later) copper made places like Lower Mesopotamia very difficult to settle without access to long distance trade networks. These means were provided by the development of the productive forces during the Neolithic.

The use of irrigation was already present at both Jericho and Çatalhöyük as a means of supplementing production. Around 7,000 BC these settlements went into decline but the developments that had taken place there were not lost, as this technology eventually spread into the Mesopotamian plain. The earliest evidence of irrigated agriculture in Mesopotamia has been found at Choga Mami,[50] dated to around 6,000 BC. But the settlement, and the Samarran culture of which it was a part, still had all the hallmarks of the early Neolithic. When settlers, thought to be from the Iranian plateau, began to apply this new technology to the super-fertile marshlands of lower Mesopotamia, however, it would lay the basis for a radical change in the social division of labour which would culminate in the birth of class society.

THE URBAN REVOLUTION

The Urban Revolution in the Near East did not start with large Neolithic settlements like Jericho, but with small villages, which, while unassuming at the time, possessed a great potential for development. The lowest levels of the site of Eridu, in southern Iraq, have been dated to around 5,800 BC. What makes this settlement significant is not only the fact that it was one of the first settlements to use irrigation canals to drain excess marsh water, but that it contains the earliest evidence of "buildings exclusively dedicated to cultic activities".[51] These "chapels", as they are sometimes called, were the physical manifestation of an epoch-making change in social relations: the rise of the priests.

Irrigation must have had a huge effect on the lives and consciousness of the first inhabitants of Eridu, but it also required a profound change in their organisation of labour. The digging of canals required not only the labour of many workers but also a degree of planning and direction. This work could not be effectively carried out by independent households, working alone; it required the co-operation of a relatively large number of workers under the direction of some kind of leadership.

As Marx comments in *Capital*: "All directly social or communal labour on a large scale requires, to a greater or lesser degree, a directing authority, in order to secure the harmonious co-operation of the activities of individuals."[52] That this role would first be played by the priests is not surprising. Even in hunter-gatherer society, shamans or other spiritual leaders often held a relatively privileged position in the social division of labour, so they could devote themselves to the understanding and mastery of the community's natural environment. Those individuals who had the greatest insight into the secrets of nature and the divine were naturally considered the best candidates to secure the blessings of the deity. But even the deity was himself a product of history. The belief that there exist all-powerful gods who intervene in the affairs of human beings, and are therefore to be worshipped, is very rare amongst hunter-gatherer societies, and is thought to have been absent prior to the Neolithic.[53] Ultimately The notion of a god as the highest "directing authority" imaginable was itself the ideological reflection of the increasing control of a section of society not only over natural forces, but over human beings as well.

Nor was this development the product of uniquely Mesopotamian conditions. The crucial task of predicting the Nile floods became the domain of the Egyptian priests, and the eventual source of their power. The Mayan priests in the Yucatan peninsula were likewise required to oversee the sacrifices and ceremonies that ensured the favour of the sacred *cenotes* (natural sinkholes that would fill with groundwater), the only source of freshwater in a region without rivers. We can also see a similar process unfold with the rise of the Brahmin caste in Vedic India: a group which would remain the social elite for thousands of years.

The creation of a section of society, sustained on the surplus product of the rest of the community and directing its labours, marks a turning point in the history of humanity. With it, the Neolithic in Mesopotamia comes to an end and we see the beginning of what Gordon Childe would call the "Urban Revolution". However, it must be stressed that Eridu in 5,800 BC was certainly not a class society; both production and distribution remained essentially communistic. The only compulsion the priests could rely on was the acceptance of the community, or at least the majority of its members. In all the above examples, the role played by the priestly 'caste', was initially one which benefited the whole community: as the servant, albeit a privileged one, of the commune. But at a certain stage this servant would turn usurper.

The new organisation of labour found at Eridu provided further stimulation for the development of the productive forces. The large tracts of arable land, which had been created by irrigation, allowed for the effective use of the ox-drawn plough, which made an enormous difference to the productivity of labour at the time. The enhanced water supply on these lands also gave rise to the first experiments in arboriculture, with the cultivation of the date palm.[54] On the basis of these developments flourished the "Ubaid culture", named after the site of Tell al-'Ubaid in Iraq, which lasted from 5,100 to 4,000 BC. This period saw the proliferation of agricultural settlements along irrigation canals, all possessing a common style of pottery, which was of very high quality. Many of these settlements had a central temple structure, along the same lines as Eridu, but temples of the Ubaid period were much more substantial.

It is evident from the archaeology that the greatly enhanced production of surplus, largely in the form of grain, was contributing not only to the greater wealth and size of the community as a whole, but also to the social weight of its central, directing organ. Individual priests may not have acquired much wealth for themselves by this point, but the institution of the temple certainly commanded a greater and greater proportion of social labour and its surplus product. This would not necessarily have appeared as a fundamental break with the egalitarian norms of the past. After all, if the beneficence of the guardian deity had provided the new lands and abundant harvests in the first

place, then who better to receive the surplus product in thanks?

The priests did not put the gods' wealth to waste either. In the Ubaid period, we find evidence of increasingly specialised craftsmen, and by the end of this period there would emerge a layer of full-time specialists whose workshops formed part of the temple complex.[55] From this we can infer a relation of dependence, wherein the craftsmen were effectively employed by the temple in return for products such as pottery, copper artefacts and semi-precious stones. Here again, we see the development of new productive relations developing within the womb of the old.

Ubaid culture would spread across much of Mesopotamia and even further. However, in no way did this constitute anything like a unified "empire", or even a state. There is no evidence that the various Ubaid-inspired settlements that we find across the region were either conquered or colonised by the original Ubaid settlements. What is much more likely is that, alongside an increasingly sophisticated network of trade in pottery, copper, obsidian (a volcanic stone used for making sharp blades), semi-precious stones, and other speciality trade goods, there grew up a closer cultural interaction, in which the wealth of settlements such as Eridu inspired other communities to take up similar production techniques without ever being "ruled" by them or anyone else.

Ubaid society already appears radically different to the villages of the early Neolithic. And yet in a number of fundamental respects Ubaid society remained closer in character to primitive communism than class society. In spite of the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth within the community, and the rising power of the priests as the stewards of the surplus, the community itself remained independent of all others, democratic and free from forced labour. What we see in the late Ubaid period could therefore be characterised as a kind of transitional society, containing at the same time powerful elements of both class society and primitive communist society. And out of relations developed within Ubaid society there would arise the first ever class society, based on the rule of the city over the village, and of man by man: Uruk.

THE FIRST CLASS SOCIETY

Uruk is one of the world's first states, only competing with Ancient Egypt for the definitive title of oldest. The city of Uruk began life as a couple of Ubaid villages around 5,000 BC. Like other settlements of the period, they were centred around relatively large temple complexes: one devoted to Anu ("Heaven"), god of the sky, and one to Inanna ("Lady of Heaven"). Over time, the growth of these villages would cause them to fuse into a single enormous city, which by roughly 3,100 BC was home to a staggering 40,000 people.

Image: Schauschgamuwa

"[T]he most commonly found ceramic artefacts at Uruk were rough, "bevelled-rim bowls". But this was not the step back it might seem to be; Uruk was flourishing and its potters were busy creating the first mass-produced item in history."

As Uruk grew, along with its population of specialised and dependent craftsmen, the ancient self-sufficiency, and therefore independence, of the commune began to break down. The concentration of craft production in the urban centres and of food production in the villages meant that the largest settlements could no longer depend on their own population for the production of food and so began taking part of the surplus product from the surrounding villages.[56] Upon this dramatic shift in the social division of labour arose the earliest separation of the town and country. Marx considered this separation so important to the development of class society he claimed that "the whole economic history of society is summed up in the movement of this antithesis."[57]

The surplus from the villages would likely have taken the form of an offering for the gods who resided at their respective temples, but there was also something of a 'contractual' element involved. The farmers received craft products and trade commodities that would otherwise have been inaccessible. Eventually, this relation was transformed from one of complementary interdependence to outright exploitation, in the form of a "tithe"[58] owed to the temples at Uruk by the surrounding villages, paid in kind irrespective of whether the farmers received anything in return, and extracted by force if necessary.

In addition to the surplus product, the temple bureaucracy also laid claim to the surplus labour-time of the mass of the population. In Uruk we see the transformation of quantity into quality, with the direct control and exploitation of labour on a mass scale, no longer through the old communal structures of the village and the family, but by a distinct class, standing above and usurping the commune.

This turning point is manifested physically in the pottery left behind from the period. In contrast to the expertly made bowls and vases of the Ubaid culture, the most commonly found ceramic artefacts at Uruk were rough, "bevelled-rim bowls". But this was not the step back it might seem to be; Uruk was flourishing and its potters were busy creating the first mass-produced item in history. Using standardised moulds, specialised craftsmen could produce thousands of these bowls in a short period of time.

But who was using these bowls? The most widely accepted explanation is that they were used to distribute rations to gangs of forced, "*corvée*" labourers, most

likely peasants from the surrounding villages who were conscripted to work on projects such as digging irrigation canals or erecting city walls, and to do seasonal work on temple lands.[59] The huge number of such bowls discovered at Uruk and other sites of the period attests to the size of the workforce and the scale of the projects involved. The labourers could well have been drafted from different villages and family groups, to work for people they did not know, on projects that would confer little to no direct benefit on themselves or their families. New class relations, outside of the old communal structures, were beginning to take form.

The changes taking place in the relations of production at the base of society began to produce changes in property relations. Prior to the Uruk period, all land belonged collectively to the family and could not pass out of it. This meant that it always remained in the possession and under the collective control of the village commune, which was itself made up of several large family groups, similar to the *gentes* of the Homeric Greeks. Evidence of this gentile or clan ownership of land can even be seen much later, in the Early Dynastic period. In "contracts" for the purchase of fields the purchaser had to distribute "gifts" to the entire extended family of the individual seller before he could secure their permission for the land to be released from their collective control.[60] But the new relations that had emerged out of the city posed a significant threat to this state of affairs.

As Uruk grew, the pre-existing village lands continued to be managed under the old family system. However, the extension of irrigation projects, carried out by *corvée* labour under the direction of the temple, had created virgin arable land to which no family or village could lay claim. This meant that it naturally fell outside of the old communal system. Instead, these new lands were assigned to the temple. Over time, parts of these temple lands were assigned to individuals in return for services rendered to the city. Naturally, these individuals came from the ruling elite. These assignments did not confer absolute ownership and were considered as a temporary and revocable stipend, but they still had the effect of creating a form of individual possession and control of land, independent of the villages.

The dissolution of the old communal order can also be seen within the city of Uruk itself. The citizens of Uruk did not all benefit equally from the surplus extracted from the villages. The temple held exclusive control over the surplus product, appropriating a greater and greater share for itself. What was not consumed by the temple bureaucracy was stored, distributed and traded under its control. On the other hand, the disintegration of the family system had created an underclass of people without the means to support themselves. The growing weight of surplus extraction bearing down on the villages began to push those peasants who were unable to pay into debt. Those who failed to pay their debts could be enslaved by their creditors, along with their wives and children. In the late Uruk period we begin to see evidence of the employment of widows and orphans as a form of servile labour, producing textiles in workshops attached to the temple.[61] The product of these workshops would then be traded, sometimes across long distances, in return for sought-after goods such as copper and obsidian.

This new product of 'civilisation' also gives us a powerful indication of the extent to which the status of women had fallen in Uruk by this time. In the city, wages or lands were conferred to individual craftsmen, priests etc., who were always male. In the countryside, cereal cultivation using the ox-drawn plough was likewise an exclusively male occupation. As this branch of the social division of labour became all-important, so too did the position of men in society.

The place of the woman as an equal producer within the family was "degraded and reduced to servitude", "the slave of [man's] lust and a mere instrument for the production of children"[62], as Engels put it. This was recognised by the Sumerians themselves: "Spread out your robe so he can lie upon you, and perform for this primitive the task of womankind!"[63], the trapper demands of Shamash, "the harlot", in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The rise of inheritance through the male line left women entirely dependent on their husbands or male relatives. If their husband died, the only salvation offered by the temple was employment in the workshop, performing the "women's work" of the home in squalid conditions, only to expand the wealth of the ruling class. Not for nothing did Engels remark that "the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male"[64].

Looking back on the rise of class society in Uruk, it is difficult to believe that such a gigantic act of usurpation could have been tolerated. But it could not have been achieved by force alone. As Trotsky writes, "The historical justification for every ruling class consisted in this – that the system of exploitation it headed raised the development of the productive forces to a new level."[65] On the basis of this development, the living standards and cultural level of a significant section of the population was raised, especially in the cities. This development can be seen in the birth of writing and money, two of the most important innovations in the history of humanity.

WRITING AND MONEY

There is a close interconnection between the development of money, writing, and class society. Writing develops more or less simultaneously in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, but for simplicity's sake, we will focus on Mesopotamia. Symbols on clay, known as accounting tokens, began to appear in modern day Iran as early as 4000 BC. Someone attempting to account for three sheep might make three 'sheep' tokens and string them together on a piece of cord. Over time, as flocks became larger, symbols representing different numbers of livestock were invented. The tokens were often then encased in a clay outer casing, known as a *bulla*, and baked.[66] Pictographic tablets from sites like Tell Brak in Syria, which show images of animals next to numbers, reflect the furthest that this use of symbols could develop before a fully-fledged writing system emerged.

Image: Paul Hudson

Tell Brak pictographic tablets.

Image: Rama

An Uruk cuneiform tablet, on the bottom left is visible the symbol for 'eat' which is a composite of a head and a bevelled rim bowl.

In Uruk, a writing system developed which allowed temple bureaucrats to communicate complex concepts with each other, based on the pictograms of the previous period. Initially, it was used to organise the economic resources of Uruk. From around 3,200 BC, "cuneiform" writing (referring to the wedged shape of its signs) begins to appear in the archaeological record. Of the cuneiform tablets associated with Uruk, around 85% are economic and administrative in nature. An exceptionally complex writing system such as cuneiform presupposes the existence of a layer in society who had the time to learn to read and write: the scribes. The scribes' possession of this knowledge secured them an important place in the ruling classes of both Mesopotamia and Egypt. As it says in the Ancient Egyptian *Satire of the Trades*: "See, there is no office free from supervisors except the scribe's. He is the supervisor!"[67]

Though it began with economic necessity, writing was then put to use for a whole variety of purposes. Cuneiform came to be used across Mesopotamia for thousands of years. Eventually, the earliest literature and poetry, such as the famous epic of Gilgamesh, the Hurrian Hymn to Nikal, the world's oldest known song, and Hammurabi's code of laws would all be inscribed in cuneiform. In this sense, every poet bears within him the "shattered remains" of the accountant.

Just as the growth of the surplus and the temple bureaucracy had created a social need for the communication of information through writing, the increased specialisation and interdependence within society necessitated constant exchange of a wider and wider variety of products. In Uruk, these exchanges were largely managed by the temple. For example, a potter producing bevelled-rim bowls could expect to receive sufficient rations of barley from the temple, which would have been taken as a tithe from the villages.

The sheer scale and complexity of the distribution carried out by the temple went far beyond the limits of the personal exchanges that had been common during the Neolithic period. A more objective system of measurement was therefore required. Weights of silver were measured in *grains*, *shekels*, *minas*, and *talents*. This system was then used to create units of account, which allowed the temple bureaucrats to compare the values of the various commodities that were passing through their stores, giving rise to money in its earliest and most basic form: a "universal measure of value".[68] Initially, both volumes of barley and weights of precious metals played this role: 300 litres of barley was equal to one silver shekel. These early forms of money would almost certainly not have circulated amongst the population as coin or currency. In fact, these quantities of barley and silver were tangible representatives of the abstract measurement of value being carried out within the temple. But like writing, money would not be confined to the desk of the temple bureaucrat forever. It was destined to play an even greater role in the history of civilisation: Currency, credit, and all of the gleaming towers of high finance today can draw their genealogy from these humble weights of silver and rations of barley.

The measurement of time was also standardised, using a sexagesimal counting system that produced an impressively accurate year of 12 months and 360 days. This system is also to thank for our hours containing 60 minutes. Likewise, a standardised measurement of distance was introduced to assist in the planning of agricultural land and irrigation canals. All of these innovations, which Aristotle wisely noted were directly linked to the liberation of the priests and scribes from manual work, provided a colossal impetus to the power of scientific thought, and brought into existence the first astronomers and mathematicians.

THE BIRTH OF THE STATE

By 3,100 BC, we have ample evidence of a class of priests and scribes, centred around the temple, who held exclusive control over the production and distribution of the wealth of society, and were beginning to secure for themselves a heritable reserve of private wealth. We can also see that this class was becoming fully self-aware, in the sense that it saw itself as separate and superior to the rest of society and propagated an ideology of rule that reflected their interests.

One other feature of the emergence of the new ruling class in Uruk is the rise of the first "priest kings", who appear in statues and clay-seal designs of this period. No historically verifiable identity or recorded acts can be reliably associated with these anonymous rulers. Even the name "priest king" is something of a misnomer, as the earliest title we can find for the ruler of Uruk is *En*, meaning simply "high priest". Whether these kings could be truly considered as heads of state in the fullest sense of the word is open to debate. However, we can be certain that the appearance of these "priest kings" marks a further qualitative shift in the disintegration of the old communal social system, and the beginning of a new form of political organisation.

With the dramatic increase in the surplus product, and its concentration in the temples, it became increasingly necessary for cities such as Uruk to erect walls and organise some form of military force, in order to repel raids from nomadic tribes of herdsmen or even rival cities. However, this military organisation required a commander. Clay seals from the time suggest that this role was fulfilled by the priest kings of Uruk and later Sumerian monarchs.[69]

Beneath the king there also existed the *unkin*, a communal assembly. This was not simply the continuation of the old communal organisation, however. The old village assemblies had been decision-making bodies that resolved issues within the families that made up the village. By contrast, the emerging state, or proto-state, claimed absolute authority over not only the city where the priest king resided, but a surrounding territory as well. The assembly could advise, like the "Elders" of the Epic of Gilgamesh, who warned the impetuous king before his struggle with the giant, Humbaba.[70] But ultimately the priest-king was answerable only to the god who protected the city, and in reality to the ruling class in whose interests he governed.

Not long after the rise of the priest kings, Uruk would experience a period of

crisis and collapse, marking the end of the so-called "first urbanisation". After 3,100 BC we find not only a "significant retrogression"[71] of Uruk culture in the archaeological record, but the permanent decline and even complete disappearance of other cities in the region, which had been growing up along with Uruk throughout the fourth millennium BC. For example, at the site of Arslantepe, in northern Mesopotamia, we find evidence that the city's large temple complex was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt.[72]

Evidence is too scarce to put forward a single definitive explanation for such a widespread collapse. One potential factor is the impact of drought or the impact of over-farming, but other more social factors would also likely have played an important and even decisive role. As can be seen throughout the history of class society, including our own era, the ruling class will tend to shift the burden of any crisis onto the shoulders of the direct producers. When production was expanding, it is possible that the new class contradictions in society could have been somewhat obscured, but with a drop in agricultural production, the conflict between the peasant villages and the ruling class in the cities would likely have been thrown into stark relief.

Mario Liverani, in his book *The Ancient Near East*, argues that the destruction of the temple at Arslantepe by fire suggests a violent struggle. What can be known with certainty is that it was replaced only by a few simple households, with no return to a centralised temple structure. It is not outside the bounds of possibility that a similar struggle erupted in the territory of Uruk, with villages resisting the demands of the temple for surplus or even attempting to break away altogether.

Following the crisis at the end of the fourth millennium, a totally new structure enters the archaeological record: the palace. Uruk and similar settlements were centred around temple complexes, which appropriated and controlled the entire surplus. Later settlements, such as Jemdet Nasr, possessed both a temple and a palace complex, with storerooms and workshops, similar to the temples of the Uruk period[73]. The palace, *e-gal* (meaning "big house"), thus served as a productive as well as an administrative centre, and was the residence of the *lugal* (literally "big man"). From this point onwards, the existence of the state, in the fullest sense of the word, is indisputable.

THE ROLE OF FORCE

The crisis experienced at Uruk, and the complete collapse at other sites such as Arslantepe, suggests that the direct rule of the priests, despite their considerable ideological power, lacked the brute force required to hold down the subject population if the need arose. The first armies were little more than the armed people, drafted for military service. If the people themselves were in revolt, the priests would have had little to fall back on. What was required for the continuation of class relations was a permanent force of "full-time workers, specialised in military activities,"[74] set apart from the population at large, not only to protect the city from outsiders, but to defend the ruling class from the oppressed masses. This "special body of armed men" would become the state, with a "big man" at its head. As Engels explains:

> *"The state is therefore by no means a power imposed on society from without; just as little is it 'the reality of the moral idea'... Rather, it is a product of society at a particular stage of development; it is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble self-contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcise. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state."*[75]

Contrary to the explanation put forward by Engels, anarchist theorists have often argued that the state is the root of all evils, including class society, inequality, and money, which somehow arose on the basis of the organised violence of kings and states. David Graeber, for example, argues that "the real origins of money are to be found in crime and recompense, war and slavery, honour, debt and redemption."[76] But this is plainly contradicted by the archaeological record, which weighs heavily in Engels' defence.

What anarchists get right about the state is its absolute interdependence with class society. The experience of Uruk shows that no class society can survive for very long without a state to protect and regulate it. However, to interpret class exploitation as being the *product* of the state is to put the cart before the horse. Unless we define the state as any form of violence or control, thus rendering the state eternal and meaningless, then it is evident from a study of ancient states that class society was already in the process of formation by the time the first real kings and states arose.

That the rise of class society has everywhere required the forcible creation of the state only reflects the fact that the final dissolution of the old communal relations, which had been prepared over thousands of years, could not be achieved in a peaceful and gradual manner. There remained a large section of society whose interests conflicted directly with the new relations of exploitation that were beginning to emerge. At the same time there were evidently influential sections of society who stood to gain a great deal from the new order. This produced a conflict, which at a decisive point would likely have cleaved the whole of society into opposing camps, and which could only ultimately be decided by force: "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power."[77]

COMBINED AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

The process of state formation in Mesopotamia provides a fascinating example of how class society developed out of communal, Neolithic society. This led Gordon Childe to set out a list of the important "features" he discovered in these early class societies, including "full-time specialist craftsmen, transport workers, merchants, officials and priests", the extraction of a surplus, writing, and "a state organisation based now on residence rather than kinship."[78]

The many critics of Childe have twisted his valuable description of one of the most important processes in human history into

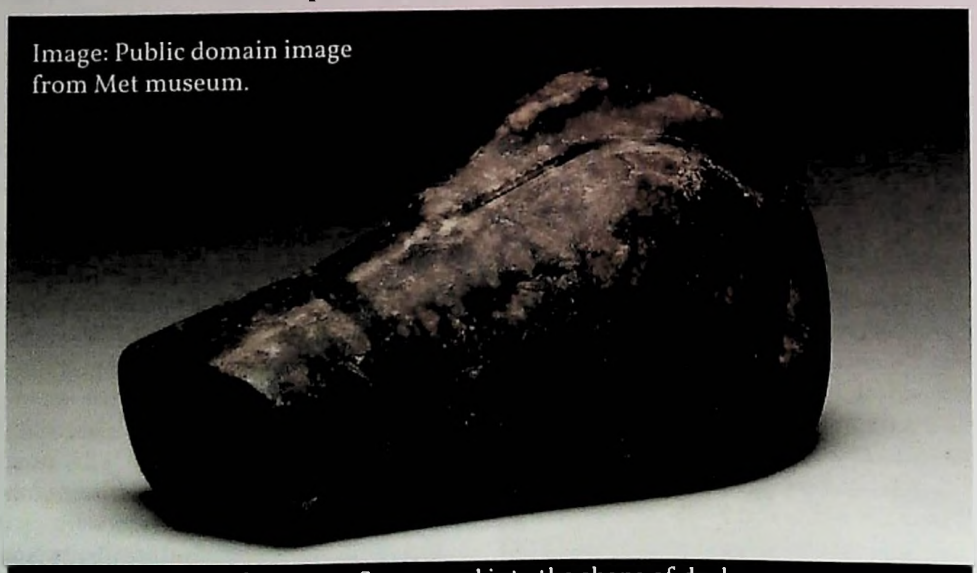

Image: Public domain image from Met museum.

Mesopotamian weights were often carved into the shape of ducks.

some sort of 'recipe' for state formation, in which the state is merely any society that contains cities plus all the above features. As a result, they claim that a Marxist analysis of the state is too prescriptive, and really only applies to Mesopotamia. However, this argument holds little water. Marxists understand that state societies are not simply a list of features. There are civilisations, such as the Inca, which never developed writing; and others like Ancient Egypt, in which cities played a smaller economic role. Rather than classifying societies in an empirical, taxonomic way, based on their surface features, it is necessary to look into their origin, development and relation to other societies of the time.

In *Capital*, Marx writes at length about the development of capitalism in England, where it took its "classical form"[79], with only passing references to other countries. At the same time, he did not argue that the exact form in which the process took place in England was the only way in which it could take place. What made England the classic country of capitalist development also made it unique. The fact it was the first to develop a capitalist economy out of the development of feudalism meant that the process was stretched out over hundreds of years and many intermediate, transitional forms. This allowed a close study of the underlying, general processes taking place not just in England but in a number of other countries. But, this does not mean that every country had to go through a period of wool production for the market, followed by manufacture and then, finally, the factory system in order to develop capitalism.

The same can be said of the so-called "pristine" states, as found in Sumer, Egypt and China for example. Far from being "pristine", these early class societies were extremely 'messy' and contradictory, bearing the stamp of earlier, communistic relations. The ones that sprang up afterwards and under the influence of these civilisations did so much more rapidly and without much of the prehistoric baggage that could be found at Uruk, for example. Sumerian city states which developed later, such as Ur, could leap head and shoulders above their antecedents. This phenomenon is widely documented throughout history, including in the history of the development of capitalism. The privilege of being the first to develop is quickly succeeded by the "privilege of backwardness", whereby more economically backward societies can develop faster and more rationally by leaning on the achievements of their more advanced competitors.

A similar process is described in Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. He explains that the origins of the Athenian state can be traced back to the massive social tumult caused by the "corrosive" influence of private property, slavery and money, all of which had already been developed elsewhere. In these conditions, the rise of Athenian class society not only occurred in a much shorter period than at Uruk, but even took a completely different form, without a centralised temple bureaucracy or taxation as the primary means of acquiring the surplus product. It was a society based on a qualitatively different mode of production, characterised by a higher level of private property, and with it slavery, precisely because it came later, on the basis of Iron Age as opposed to Bronze Age technology, and in a different environment as compared with Sumer and Egypt.

"[T]he constant interaction between societies at different stages necessarily produces leaps and variety in social development: a phenomenon referred to by Leon Trotsky as 'combined and uneven development'."

Marxists are often criticised for applying a rigid template to the development of class societies. However, if we use the Marxist method properly to analyse the rise of the state, we can see that the opposite is true. We could even go so far as to say that it is an iron law of historical materialism that the constant interaction between societies at different stages necessarily produces leaps and variety in social development: a phenomenon referred to by Leon Trotsky as "combined and uneven development".

Whatever the differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Mauryans and the Maya, or Greece and Rome, the process that underlies the development of these states is the same. In all cases the necessary development of the productive forces leads to the production of a surplus, which in turn allows a group of people to live on the product of others' labour. In the course of development, this group develops into a class with its own interests, opposed to the rest of society. Either due to external pressure, or the internal contradictions of this new class society (usually both), a state, ultimately representing the interests of this class, raises itself above the rest of society as a guardian of "order" – that is the stability and continuation of the existing relations of production. This process can happen over thousands of years or in a very short period of time, and can take many forms. But the most important lesson is that the development of the state is fundamentally caused by the development of social classes and the contradictions which flow from this.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

This does not mean that a state and classes were bound to develop automatically in every community in which the basic economic conditions had begun to take form. Such a process can be interrupted, scattered, slowed down or reversed in the course of real historical events, particularly the course of the emerging class struggle within said society. As Marx explains in *The Holy Family*:

> *"History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth', it 'wages no battles'. It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; 'history' is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims."*[80]

Individuals could play a very decisive role in the formation of early states, just as they can in the modern class struggle. In archaeology, a popular concept to explain the rise of the early state is the "aggrandiser principle". This argues that, in the transition from a chiefdom to a state, individual "aggrandisers", or "great men", motivated by increasing their own power, play an instrumental role in the formation of early states. This usually amounts to a "great man" view of history, which presents the actions and personalities of great individuals as an independent and driving factor in the history of society. But with a materialist approach to state formation, it is possible to put these great men in their real place. This is most clear in Egyptian state formation, due to the emphasis on elaborate funerary rituals and royal burials allowing us to pick out the graves of individual kings with ease.

We can see in depictions of Narmer, the king who unified Upper and Lower Egypt, that the process of state formation was far from automatic. The Narmer Palette, which provides one of the earliest known depictions of any king in history, shows Narmer wearing the crown of Upper Egypt, forcing a Lower Egyptian to surrender to him, mace in hand. The Early Dynastic kings

Image: Public domain

"The Narmer Palette, which provides one of the earliest known depictions of any king in history, shows Narmer wearing the crown of Upper Egypt, forcing a Lower Egyptian to surrender to him, mace in hand. The Early Dynastic kings did not simply inherit a ready-made state; they had to form one through force."

did not simply inherit a ready-made state; they had to form one through force.

If Narmer had been an incompetent and cowardly leader, then the formation of the Ancient Egyptian state would likely not have taken the same form. In this sense, the character and actions of individuals are decisive: whether events happen as they do depend on the people who carry them out. However, ambitious, charismatic individuals have existed at every point in history. The question that anyone wishing to understand the rise of the states must answer is why, at that particular point, these individuals were able to achieve their goals in such a historically decisive way.

Individuals like Narmer of the Egyptians, King Jaguar of the Zapotecs, or the *lugals* of Sumer, may have been acting in their own interests, but they also reflected the underlying necessity that existed in a class society riven by its own contradictions. In the words of Plekhanov:

> *"A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes."*[81]

Like the temple builders of Göbekli Tepe and the Neolithic settlers who drained the marshes of Sumer, the first "great men" were individuals who by their actions and abilities made history. But they did not make it out of nothing. If their vision and ambition appears to have changed society by the sheer force of will alone, it is because this vision disclosed a picture of the future being prepared by much more than the will of any individual.

At the dawn of class society, the overthrow of the commune and the formation of states was one of the "great social needs" of the time. A solution to the crisis that had opened up in society had to be found, and it was found in the birth of the state, in which the actions of leaders like Narmer played an important role. The mistake made by historians and archaeologists is to imply that individual agency and historical necessity are mutually exclusive, when in reality the two are united within every historical event. It is precisely through the conflict of innumerable individual wills that historical necessity exerts itself.

IN DEFENCE OF PROGRESS

Considering the hardships faced by Neolithic farmers and the exploitation endured by so many of their descendants under class society, some have questioned whether we can even describe this development as "progress" at all. Certainly, the liberal myth of an enlightened "social contract", under which all of mankind has lived a more peaceful and prosperous existence, is manifestly false. The life of the

Sumerian peasant was likely as "nasty, brutish and short" as many of his Neolithic ancestors. Nor can progress be seen as any sort of moral ascendancy, if the enslavement of women under class society is anything to go by. The only conception of progress that can take into account the obvious development that has taken place over the ages, without twisting oneself into a hopeless tangle of self-contradictions, is that of the development of the productive forces: of humanity's mastery over the forces of nature and over our own social development.

Certainly, if progress meant an improvement in all areas of life for everyone, we would be hard-pressed to find much genuine progress in human history from the end of the last Ice Age onwards. Nevertheless, the progress of humanity as a whole in this period is unmistakable. Between 5,000 and 2,000 BC, the world's population increased five times over, from an estimated 5 million to 25 million.[82] Liverani estimates that the rise of the first city states coincided with a tenfold rise in production, as compared with Neolithic levels.[83] This rise in productivity, comprising discoveries in science, mathematics and art that we still use today, was achieved under relations that were much more unequal and oppressive, and only served to strengthen those relations. The same could be said of the rise of capitalism. What made both the rise of class society and the rise of capitalism progressive was not their abstract moral superiority, but their concrete necessity as stages in the development of the productive forces: the only form in which further development could take place.

However, the fact that class exploitation and oppression in various forms have at one time been a necessary part of social development does not mean that they must always be so. Primitive communism was necessary and inevitable, and yet it was just as inevitably overthrown. By what right can class society claim to be the final and absolute expression of human nature, to which all of history has been tending? In history as in nature, "all that exists deserves to perish"; that which serves as a way forward for development is eventually destined to be overthrown by that same development.

Every conquest won in our struggle for existence necessarily brings forth its own obstacles and threats, against which the struggle for further progress must take place. This is especially the case under class society, in which "every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others".[84] The real content of progress, the development of the social productive forces of humanity, is thus realised in a succession of limited and contradictory forms. If we find those forms objectionable today, all that tells us is that they have become obsolete. But it in no way disproves the fact of progress in general.

Today, we live in a world in which the productive forces that have already been developed are straining against the fetters of private property, the so-called "free market", and the division of the world into capitalist nation states. The regular economic crises, imperialist wars and growing horrors of climate change all bear witness to the fact that, under capitalism, no further progress is possible for humanity. Only by overthrowing this defunct and dying system can we hope to liberate humanity from the nightmare offered by its continued existence. But this can only be achieved by the seizure of the gigantic productive forces created by the billions of propertyless workers who currently live under capitalism, and the planning of the global economy in a rational and democratic manner. In short, the further progress of humanity means nothing other than the end of class society itself, and all its deadly trappings, not least the state.

Friedrich Engels wrote in 1884:

"We are now rapidly approaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes has not only ceased to be a necessity, but becomes a positive hindrance to production. They will fall as inevitably as they once arose. The state inevitably falls with them. The society which organises production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers will put the whole state machinery where it will then belong – into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe."[85]

Today that stage has long since arrived. The conditions for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of socialism are not just present, they are "rotten ripe". Now we must fight to make Engels' prediction a reality and to build a future of freedom, fulfilment and hope for the whole of humanity. ■

Due to the large number of references featured in this article, we have chosen not to publish the full list of citations here. For those who wish to learn more about the processes and events described above, we therefore suggest the following texts:

K. Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, and *A Critique of Political Economy*
F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*
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P. Draper, *Institutional, Evolutionary, and Demographic Contexts of Gender Roles: A Case Study of !Kung Bushmen*
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B. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilisation*
V.G. Childe, *The Urban Revolution*, and *Man Makes Himself*

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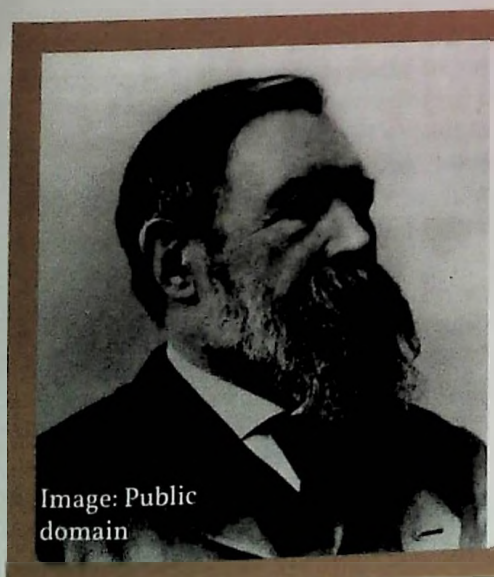

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"We are now rapidly approaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes has not only ceased to be a necessity, but becomes a positive hindrance to production. They will fall as inevitably as they once arose. The state inevitably falls with them." – Friedrich Engels

CIVILISATION, BARBARISM AND THE MARXIST VIEW OF HISTORY

This article by **Alan Woods** originally written twenty years ago, deals with barbarism and the development of human society. In postmodern writing, history appears as an essentially meaningless and inexplicable series of random events or accidents. But a closer look reveals clear patterns of development, going back to the earliest days of human society. The understanding of these underlying laws are essential for anyone with a serious interest in changing the world.

Image: Zunkir

The Sack of Rome by Joseph-Noël Sylvestre.

Henry Ford is reported to have said "history is bunk". For those of you who are not familiar with the intricacies of American slang, the word bunk signifies nonsense – and nonsense signifies something that has no meaning. This not very elegant phrase adequately expresses an opinion that has gathered strength in recent years. The illustrious founder of the Ford motor company further refined his definition of history when he described it as "*just one damn thing after another*", which is one way of looking at it.

The same idea is expressed rather more elegantly (but no less erroneously) by the supporters of the post-modernist craze that some people seem to regard as valid philosophy. Actually, this idea is not new. It was expressed long ago by the great English historian Edward Gibbon, the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the celebrated phrase of Edward Gibbon, history is "little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."[1]

History appears here as an essentially meaningless and inexplicable series of random events or *accidents*. It is governed by no laws that we can comprehend. To try to understand it would therefore be a pointless exercise. A variation on this theme is the idea, now very popular in some academic circles, that there is no such thing as higher and lower forms of social development and culture. They claim that there is no such thing as 'progress', which they consider to be an old-fashioned idea left over from the 19th century, when it was popularised by Victorian Liberals, Fabian socialists and – Karl Marx.

This denial of progress in history is characteristic of the psychology of the bourgeoisie in the phase of capitalist decline. *It is a faithful reflection of the fact that,*

under capitalism, progress has indeed reached its limits and threatens to go into reverse. The bourgeoisie and its intellectual representatives are, quite naturally, unwilling to accept this fact. Moreover, they are organically incapable of recognising it. Lenin once observed that a man on the edge of a cliff does not reason. However, they are dimly aware of the real situation, and try to find some kind of justification for the impasse of their system by denying the possibility of progress altogether!

So far has this idea sunk into consciousness that it has even been carried into the realm of non-human evolution. Even such a brilliant thinker as Stephen Jay Gould, whose dialectical theory of *punctuated equilibria* transformed the way that evolution is perceived, argued that it is wrong to speak of progress from lower to higher in evolution, so that microbes must be placed on the same level as human beings. In one sense it is correct that all living things are related (the human genome has conclusively proved this). Man is not a special creation of the Almighty, but the product of evolution. Nor is it correct to see evolution as a kind of grand design, the aim of which was to create beings like ourselves (teleology – from the Greek *telos*, meaning an end). However, in rejecting an incorrect idea, it is not necessary to go to the other extreme, leading to new errors.

It is not a question of accepting some kind of pre-ordained plan either related to Divine intervention or *teleology*, but it is clear that the laws of evolution inherent in nature do in fact determine the development from simple forms of life to more complex forms. The earliest forms of life already contain within them the embryo of all future developments. It is possible to explain the development of eyes, legs and other organs without recourse to any preordained plan. At a certain stage we get the development of a central nervous system and a brain. Finally, with *homo sapiens*, we arrive at human consciousness. *Matter becomes conscious of itself.* There has been no more important revolution since the development of organic matter (life) from inorganic matter.

To please our critics, we should perhaps add the phrase *from our point of view*. Doubtless the microbes, if they were able to have a point of view, would probably raise serious objections. But we are human beings and must necessarily see things through human eyes. And we do assert that evolution does in fact represent a development of simple life forms to more complex and versatile ones – in other words *progress from lower to higher forms of life*. To object to such a formulation seems to be somewhat pointless, not scientific but merely *scholastic*. In saying science is intended to the microbes, who after all have been around for a lot longer than us, and if the capitalist system is not overthrown, may yet have the last laugh.

"It is a well-known fact that science under capitalism becomes less and less scientific, the closer it gets to society. The so-called social sciences are not really sciences at all, but ill-concealed attempts to justify capitalism..."

CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM

If, in order not to offend microbes and other species, one is not allowed to refer to higher and lower forms of life, then still less – according to the latest fashion – can one be permitted to assert that the barbarians represent a lower form of social and cultural development than slavery – let alone capitalism. To argue that the barbarians possessed their own culture is not to say a great deal. From the time the first humans produced stone tools, it is correct to say that every period has had its own culture. That these cultures have not been sufficiently appreciated until recently is certainly true. The bourgeois have always had a tendency to exaggerate the achievements of some cultures and to denigrate others. Behind this lies the vested interests of those who seek to enslave, dominate and exploit other peoples, and to disguise this oppression and exploitation under the hypocritical mantel of cultural superiority.

Under this banner, the Christians of northern Spain (true descendants of the barbarian Goths, by the way) destroyed the irrigation systems and the wonderful culture of Islamic Al-Andaluz, and went on to destroy the rich and flourishing cultures of the Aztecs and Incas. Under the same banner, the British, French and Dutch colonialists systematically enslaved the peoples of Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Not content with reducing these peoples to the worst kind of slavery, they were robbed not only of their land but of their souls. The Christian missionaries finished off the job started by the soldiers and slavedrivers, robbing the people of their cultural identity.

All this is perfectly true, and it is necessary to treat the culture of every people with the respect and affection it deserves. Every period, every people, has added something to the great treasure-house of human culture that is our collective heritage. But does this signify that one culture is as good as any other? Does it mean that one cannot assert that between the earliest stone axes (some of which show a remarkable degree of aesthetic sense) and Michelangelo's statue of David, no artistic progress is discernible? In a word, is it not possible to speak about progress in human history?

In logic, there is a well-known method that reduces an argument to absurdity by carrying it to its extreme. We see something similar to this in certain modern trends in anthropology, history and sociology. It is a well-known fact that science under capitalism becomes less and less scientific, the closer it gets to society. The so-called social sciences are not really sciences at all, but ill-concealed attempts to justify capitalism, or at least to discredit Marxism (which boils down to the same thing). This was certainly true of the past, when so-called anthropologists did their best to justify the enslavement of so-called backward races by denigrating their culture. But matters are not much better now when certain schools attempt to bend the stick the other way.

It is quite true that the imperialists have deliberately downplayed or even denied the culture of "backward peoples" in Africa, Asia and so forth. The English pro-imperialist poet Kipling (author of *The Jungle Book*) called them "lesser breeds without the law". This cultural imperialism was undoubtedly an attempt to justify the colonial enslavement of millions of people. It is also true that all the most barbarous and inhuman actions of the past pale in insignificance with the horrors inflicted on the human race by our allegedly civilised capitalist system and its counterpart, imperialism.

It is a terrible paradox that the more humanity develops its productive capacity, the more spectacular the advances of science and technology, the greater the suffering, starvation, oppression and misery of the majority of the world's population. This fact has been recognised by even supporters of the present system. But they do nothing to rectify it. Nor can they, since they refuse to recognise that the reason for the present impasse in which human society finds itself is the very system they defend. But it is not only

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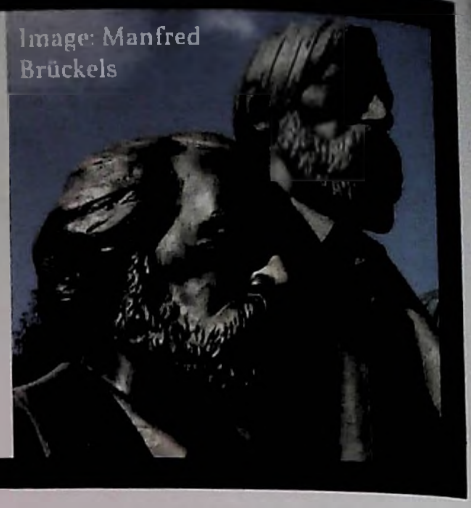


Image: Manfred Brückels

the bourgeois who refuse to draw the necessary conclusions. The same is true of many who consider themselves left-wing and radical. There are some well-meaning people, for example, who maintain that the source of all our troubles is the growth of science, technique and industry, and that it would be a good thing if we were to go back to a pre-capitalist mode of existence!

The Victorians had a very one-sided view of history, which they saw as a kind of triumphal march, an unstoppable march upwards towards progress and enlightenment – led, of course, by English capitalism. This idea also served as a convenient justification for imperialism and colonialism. The 'civilized' British went to India and Africa, armed with the Bible (and also a number of warships, cannon and high-powered rifles) to introduce the ignorant natives to the joys of western culture. Those who showed a lack of enthusiasm for the refinements of British (and also Belgian, Dutch, French and German) culture were rapidly 'educated' by bullets and bayonets.

Nowadays, the bourgeois is in a quite different frame of mind. Faced with growing evidence of the global crisis of capitalism, they are plunged into a mood of uncertainty, pessimism and dread for the future. The old songs about the inevitability of human progress seem to be quite out of tune with the harsh reality of the times. The very word 'progress' calls forth a cynical sneer. And this is no accident. People are beginning to grasp the fact that in the first decade of the 21st century, progress has indeed come to a full stop. But this merely reflects the impasse of capitalism, which has long ago exhausted its potential for progress and become a monstrous obstacle in the path of human advance. To this extent – *and only to this extent* – one can say that it is impossible to talk about progress.

This is not the first time we have seen such a tendency. In the long period of decline that preceded the fall of the Roman Empire, it seemed to many that the end of the world was approaching. This idea was particularly strong in Christianity, where it forms the entire content of the Book of Revelation (the Apocalypse). People were really convinced that the world was coming to an end. In fact, what was coming to an end was only a particular kind of socio-economic system – the slave system that had reached its limits and was unable to develop the productive forces as it had done in the past.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the later Middle Ages, when the self-same idea was in vogue: the end of the world. Masses of people joined the flagellant sects that travelled through Europe, whipping and torturing themselves to expiate the sins of mankind in preparation for the Day of Judgement. Here again, what was coming to an end was not the world but the feudal system that had outlived its usefulness and was eventually overthrown by the rising bourgeoisie.

However, the fact that a particular socio-economic form has outlived its historical usefulness and become a reactionary obstacle to the advance of the human race does not mean that progress is a meaningless concept. It does not mean that there has been no progress in the past (including under capitalism), or that there cannot be progress in the future – once capitalism is abolished. Thus, an idea that seems at first sight to be eminently reasonable turns out to be a disguised defence of capitalism against socialism. *To make even the smallest concession to such an idea would be to abandon a consistent revolutionary position and fall into a reactionary one.*

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Society is constantly changing. History attempts to catalogue these changes and tries to explain them. But what are the laws that govern historical change? Do such laws even exist? If they do not, then human history would be entirely incomprehensible, as both Gibbon and Henry Ford believed. However, Marxists do not approach history in this manner. Just as the evolution of life has inherent laws that can be explained, and were explained, first by Darwin and in more recent times by the rapid advances in the study of genetics, so the evolution of human society has its own inherent laws that were explained by Marx and Engels.

Those who deny the existence of any laws governing human social development invariably approach history from a subjective and moralistic standpoint. Like Gibbon (but without his extraordinary talent) they shake their heads at the unending spectacle of senseless violence, the "inhumanity of man against man" (and woman), and so on and so forth. In place of a scientific view of history we get a *parson's* view. However, what is required is not a moral sermon but *a rational insight*. Above and beyond the isolated facts, it is necessary to discern broad tendencies, the transitions from one social system to another, and to work out the fundamental motor forces that determine these transitions.

By applying the method of dialectical materialism to history, it is immediately obvious that human history has its own laws, and that, consequently, it is possible to understand it as a process. The rise and fall of different socio-economic formations can be explained scientifically in terms of their ability or inability to develop the means of production, and thereby to push forward the horizons of human culture, and increase the domination of humankind over nature.

Marxism maintains that the development of human society over millions of years represents progress, but that this has never taken place in a straight line, as the Victorians (who had a vulgar and undialectical view of evolution) wrongly imagined. The basic premise of historical materialism is that the ultimate source of human development is the development of the productive forces. This is a most important conclusion because this alone can permit us to arrive at a scientific conception of history.

Before Marx and [illegible] history was seen by most pe[illegible]ies of

unconnected events or, to use a philosophical term 'accidents'. There was no general explanation of this, history had no inner lawfulness. Once one accepts this point of view, the only motor force of historical events is the role of individuals – 'great men' (or women). In other words, we are left with an idealist and subjectivist view of the historical process. This was the standpoint of the utopian socialists, who, despite their colossal insights and penetrating criticism of the existing social order, failed to understand the fundamental laws of historical development. For them, socialism was just a 'good idea', something that could therefore have been thought of a thousand years ago, or tomorrow morning. Had it been invented a thousand years ago, humankind would have been spared a lot of trouble!

It was Marx and Engels who for the first time explained that, at bottom, all human development depends on the development of productive forces, and thus placed the study of history on a scientific basis. Because the first condition for science is that we are able to look beyond the particular and arrive at general laws. For instance, the early Christians were communists (although their communism was of the utopian kind, based on consumption, not production). Their early experiments in communism led nowhere, and could lead nowhere, because the development of the productive forces at that time did not permit the development of real communism.

In the recent period it has become fashionable also in some 'left' intellectual circles to deny the existence of progress in history. In part, these tendencies represent a healthy reaction against the kind of cultural imperialism and 'Eurocentricity' that I referred to earlier. One human culture is said to be equally as valid as any other. In this way, the European progressive intellectual feels that he or she has in some way 'compensated' for the systematic rape and pillage perpetrated against the peoples of the former colonies by our forefathers – plunder which, of course, continues to the present day, although under different disguises.

The intentions of these people may be laudable, but their premises are completely wrong. In the first place, it is rather cold comfort for the millions of oppressed and exploited people of Asia, Africa and Latin America to learn that their ancient cultures have now been rediscovered by European intellectuals and are held in high esteem by the latter. What is necessary is not symbolic gestures and terminological radicalism but a genuine struggle against imperialism and capitalism on a world scale. However, in order that this struggle should be successful, it must be placed on a firm basis. The prior condition for success is a relentless fight for Marxist theory. It is of course necessary to put the record straight and fight against all kinds of racist and imperialist prejudices. But in fighting against an incorrect idea, it is necessary to guard against going too far, since a correct idea when pushed to extremes turns into its opposite.

Human history is not an uninterrupted line towards progress. Alongside the line of ascent, there is a line of descent. There have been periods in history when, for different reasons, society has been thrown back, progress interrupted, and civilisation and culture undermined. This was the case in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, in the period known at least in the English language as the Dark Ages. Recently, there has been a tendency on the part of some academics to rewrite history so as to present the barbarians in a more favourable light. This is not 'more scientific' or 'more objective', but simply childish.

HOW NOT TO PRESENT THE QUESTION

Recently, British TV's Channel Four began a three-part series called *Barbarians*, presented by Richard Rudgley, anthropologist and author of *Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age*. Having watched the second part of the series on the Angles and Saxons, the Germanic tribes that invaded the British Isles, I have been able to form a pretty good idea of Rudgley's central thesis. He argues that they left behind a society more civilised than the one they conquered. "The Roman Empire's reliance on slavery was replaced by a fairer society where workmanship and craft skills were encouraged and valued," Rudgley argues.

People generally believe that the Roman legacy to Britain was a civilised society later brutalised by the barbarian tribes that invaded during the Dark Ages. Not so, says Rudgley: "In my journey to understand the Dark Ages, I am finding that many of the things I value have their roots – not in Roman civilisation – but in the world the barbarians built in the ruins of the Roman Empire."

Rudgley has made an astounding discovery: *the Saxons knew how to build ships* – and fast ones, at that. He argues that the barbarians brought truly vast talents and crafts to these shores. He says: "Their skills were immense. You have only to look at some of the metalwork, woodwork and jewellery from the period." But the Romans knew how to build not just ships, but roads, aqueducts, cities and a lot besides. Rudgley overlooks the trifling detail that these things were destroyed or allowed to fall into neglect by the barbarians, and that this led to a catastrophic disruption of trade and a steep drop in the development of the productive forces and culture, which was thrown back for a thousand years.

He quotes approvingly the words of expert sword-maker Hector Cole, who says: "The Saxon swordsmiths were specialists. They were making structured blades 600 years before the Japanese." There is no doubt about this. All the barbarian tribes of this period were experts at making war and proved it by slicing through the Roman defences like a hot knife through butter. The Romans of the late Empire even began to imitate some of the military skills of the barbarians, adopting the short bow perfected by the Huns. But none of this in any way proves that the barbarians were on a comparable level of development to the Romans, and much less a superior one.

Rudgley explains that the sea crossings by which the Angles and Saxons entered Britain were not a mass invasion led by warriors but small groups of peaceful migrants looking for new settlements. Here he gets two things hopelessly mixed up. There is no doubt that the barbarians were looking for territory upon which to settle. The reasons for the mass movements of the peoples in the fifth century are probably varied. One theory is that a change of climate raised the sea level on the coastal areas of what is now the Netherlands and north Germany, making these lands uninhabitable. A more traditional view is that they were under the pressure of other tribes migrating from the East. In all probability, it was a combination of these factors and others. In general, the causes of such mass migration can be placed under the heading of historical accident. What is important is the results they produced in history. And this is just what is under dispute.

The initial contacts between the Romans and barbarians were not necessarily of a violent character. There was

Image:Public domain

The Sutton Hoo helmet – an ornately decorated 7th century Anglo-Saxon helmet.

considerable trade along the eastern frontier for centuries, which led to a progressive Romanisation of those tribes living in proximity to the Empire. Many became mercenaries and served in the Roman legions. Alaric, the Gothic leader who was the first to enter Rome, was not only a former soldier of Rome but a Christian (albeit of the Arian kind). It is also fairly certain that the first Saxons to enter Britain were peaceful traders, mercenaries and settlers. This is indicated by the tradition that they were invited into Britain by the Romanised British 'king' Vortigern, after the departure of the Roman legions.

But at this point, Rudgley's analysis begins to break down. He has entirely missed the point about trade between civilised nations and barbarians, which was invariably connected with piracy, spying and war. The barbarian traders would take careful note of the strengths and weaknesses of the nations with which they were in contact. If there were signs of weakness, the 'peaceful' commercial relations would be followed up by armed bands in search of plunder and conquest. It is sufficient to read the Old Testament to see that this was precisely the relation between the pastoral-nomadic Israeli tribes and the ancient Canaanites, who, as civilised urban peoples, stood on a higher level of development.

The assertion that the Romans stood on a higher cultural level than the barbarians can easily be demonstrated by the following fact. Although the barbarians succeeded in conquering the Romans, they themselves were fairly quickly absorbed, and even lost their own language and ended up speaking a dialect of Latin. Thus, the Franks, who gave their name to modern France, were a Germanic tribe speaking a language related to modern German. The same thing happened to the Germanic tribes that invaded Spain and Italy.

The one glaring exception to this rule appears to be the fact that the Angles and Saxons who invaded Britain were not absorbed by the more advanced Celtic Romano-Britons. The English language is basically a Germanic language (with a later admixture of Norman French from the 11th century on). In fact, the number of words of Celtic origin in the English language is insignificant, whereas there is a very large number of Arabic words in the Spanish language. The reason for this is that the Arabs in Spain stood on a far higher cultural level than the Spanish-speaking Christians who conquered them. The only conceivable explanation is that the Anglo-Saxon barbarians (whom Mr Rudgley regards as very nice, peaceful people) must have pursued a policy of genocide against the Celtic people whose lands they seized in bloody wars of conquest.

SENTIMENTALITY OR SCIENCE?

We can therefore lay down a firm rule: *an invading people whose culture stands at a lower level than the people conquered by it will be eventually absorbed by the culture of the conquered, and not vice-versa.* It may be objected that this occurred because the numbers of the invaders were relatively small. But this does not stand up to examination. In the first place, as Rudgley himself argues, very large numbers were involved in these vast migrations – whole peoples in fact. Secondly, there are many other historical examples that prove the opposite.

The Mongols who invaded India and established the Mogul dynasty that lasted until the British conquered India were completely absorbed into the more advanced Indian way of life. Exactly the same thing happened in China. However, when the British conquered India, they were not absorbed by the native culture but on the contrary, as Marx explains, completely shattered the old Indian society that had endured for thousands of years. How was this possible? Only because Britain, where the capitalist system was developing rapidly, *stood on a higher level of development than India.*

Of course, it is possible to say that before the coming of the British, the Indians had a very high level of cultural development. Although the European conquerors looked down on the Indians as at least semi-barbarians, nothing could be further from the truth. On the basis of the very ancient Asiatic mode of production, Indian culture reached prodigious levels. Their achievements in the fields of art, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry were so brilliant that they even aroused the admiration of the more cultured representatives of the British Empire.

It is equally possible to deplore the supposedly civilized British for the extremely brutal way in which they crushed the Indians through a combination of trickery, lies, murders and massacres. That is all true, but it entirely misses the point. The real question that must be asked is this: *why were the British not absorbed by the Indian culture as the Mongols had been?* After all, in this case, it is true that the numbers of British who settled in India were insignificant when compared to the multi-millioned masses of this vast subcontinent. Yet after two hundred years, it was the Indians who learned English, and not vice-versa.

Today, half a century after the departure of the British, English is still the official language of India and remains the *lingua franca* of all educated Indians and Pakistanis. How is this to be explained? Only by the fact that capitalism represents a higher level of development than either feudalism or the Asiatic mode of production. That is the decisive fact. To complain about this, protest against 'cultural imperialism', and so on may have a certain value in the field of agitation (there is absolutely no doubt about the truly *barbarous* conduct of the imperialists in general). But from a scientific point of view, such comments do not get us very far.

To approach human history from a *sentimental* point of view is worse than useless. History knows no morality and operates according to different laws altogether. The task of any person who wishes to understand history is, first of all, to leave aside all moralistic elements, since there can be no supra-historical morality – no "morality in general" – but only particular moralities that pertain to particular historical periods and definite socio-economic formations, and have no relevance outside them.

From a scientific point of view, therefore, it makes no sense to compare the moral standards of the conduct, say, of the Romans and barbarians, the British and the Indians, the Mongols and the Chinese. Barbarous and inhuman practices

"Given the terrible state of society and the world under capitalism, we can readily understand that there are people who want to somehow escape from an unpleasant reality and put the clock back to a golden age. The trouble is that such an age never existed."

have existed in every period of history, so if we take that as a yardstick to judge the human race, one would have to draw the most pessimistic conclusions (many have done so). As a matter of fact, one could argue that the greater the degree of development, the greater the capacity to inflict terrible suffering on a large number of people. The state of the world in the first decade of the 21st century would seem to confirm this gloomy assessment of human history.

Some people have drawn the conclusion that perhaps the problem is that there has been too much development, too much progress, too much civilisation. Would we not be happier living in a simple agricultural environment – run, of course, on strictly ecological lines – tilling our own fields (without tractors), making our own clothes, baking our own bread, and so on? That is to say, would we not be better if we returned to – barbarism?

Given the terrible state of society and the world under capitalism, we can readily understand that there are people who want to somehow escape from an unpleasant reality and put the clock back to a golden age. The trouble is that such an age never existed. Those (usually middle-class) people who talk grandly about the wonders of life in the good old days of agricultural communes have no idea of how tough life was in those times. Let us quote from the manuscript of a medieval monk who, unlike our modern New Age fanatics, knew what life under feudalism was really like. This is an extract from a medieval author, a monk called Aelfric, who wrote a book to teach Latin conversation at Winchester:

Master: What do you do, ploughman, how do you do your work?

Pupil: Sir, I work very hard. I go out at dawn to drive the oxen to the field, and yoke them to the plough. However hard the winter, I dare not stay at home for fear of my lord; and having yoked the oxen and made the ploughshare and coulter fast to the plough, every day I have to plough an acre or more.

M: Do you have anyone with you?

P: I have a boy to drive the oxen with the goad, and he is now hoarse with cold and shouting.

M: What other work do you have to do in the day?

P: A great deal more. I have to fill the oxen's bin with hay, and give them water, and carry the dung outside.

M: And is it hard work?

P: Yes, it is hard work, because I am not free.

A couple of weeks of backbreaking and soul-destroying toil of this sort would surely provide a guaranteed cure for the illusions of the most die-hard romantic! What a pity we cannot order a brief trip on a time-machine for this purpose.

Roman collared slaves.

WHAT IS BARBARISM?

The word 'barbarism' is used in different contexts for different things. It can even have the force of a simple insult, when we refer to the barbaric behaviour of certain over-enthusiastic football fans. To the ancient Greeks (who first coined the word) it meant simply "one who does not speak the language" (i.e., Greek). But to Marxists, it usually signifies the stage between primitive communism and early class society, when classes begin to form and with them the state. Barbarism is a transitional phase, in which the old commune is already in a state of decay and in which classes and the state are in the process of formation.

Like all other human societies (including savagery, the phase of hunter-gathering societies based on primitive communism, which produced the marvellous cave art of France and northern Spain), the barbarians certainly had a culture, and were capable of producing very fine and sophisticated objects of art. Their techniques of warfare show that they were also capable of extraordinary feats of organisation, and this was shown when they defeated the Roman legions.

The period of barbarism represents a very large slice of human history, and is divided into several more-or-less distinct periods. In general, it is characterised by the transition from the hunter-gathering mode of production to pastoralism and agriculture, that is, from Palaeolithic savagery, passing through Neolithic barbarism to the higher barbarism of the Bronze Age, which stands at the threshold of civilisation. The decisive turning-point was what Gordon Childe called the Neolithic revolution, which represented a great leap forward in the development of human productive capacity, and therefore of culture. This is what Childe has to say:

"Our debt to preliterate barbarism is heavy. Every single cultivated food plant of any importance has been discovered by some nameless barbarian society."[2]

Here is the embryo out of which grew the towns and cities, writing, industry and everything else that laid the basis for which we call civilisation. The roots of civilisation are to be found precisely in barbarism, and still more so, in slavery. The development of barbarism ends up in slavery or else in what Marx called the Asiatic mode of production.

It would be incorrect to deny the contribution of barbarian peoples to human development. They played a role, and a vital one, at a certain stage. They possessed a culture, and an advanced one for the time in which they lived. But history does not stand still. The further development of the productive forces led to new socio-economic forms that stood on a qualitatively higher level. Our modern civilisation (such as it is) derives from the colossal conquests of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, and even more, from Greece and Rome.

While not denying the existence of barbarian culture, Marxists have no hesitation in affirming that the latter was historically superseded by the cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome that grew out of barbarism, overtook and replaced it. To deny this fact would be to fly in the face of the facts.

THE ROLE OF SLAVERY

If we look at the entire process of human history and prehistory, the first thing that strikes us is the extraordinary slowness with which our species developed. The gradual evolution of human or humanoid creatures away from the condition of animals and towards a genuinely human condition took place over millions of

Image: Dosseman

Roman aqueduct in the ancient city of Aspendos, located in modern-day Turkey. Many technological innovations such as this were lost for an entire historical epoch after the collapse of Roman civilisation.

years. For the first period that we call savagery, characterised by an extremely low development of the means of production, the production of stone tools, and a hunter-gatherer mode of existence, the line of development remains virtually flat for a very long period. It begins to accelerate precisely in the period known as barbarism (particularly with the Neolithic revolution) when the first stable communities became towns (such as Jericho, which dates from about 7,000 BC).

However, the really explosive growth occurs with Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley (and also China), Persia, Greece and Rome. In other words, the development of class society coincides with a massive upturn in the productive forces, and as a result, of human culture, which reached unprecedented heights. This is not the place to mention all the discoveries made by, say the Greeks and Romans. There is a celebrated scene in the Monty Python film *The Life of Brian*, where a rather over-enthusiastic 'freedom fighter' asks the rhetorical question: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" To his great annoyance, he got a long list of answers. We should not make the same mistake as this fictional character!

But, it may be objected, Greece and Rome stood on the basis of slavery, which is an abhorrent and inhuman institution. The marvellous achievements of ancient Athens were all predicated on slavery. Its democracy – probably the most advanced in the world to date – was the democracy of a minority of free citizens. The majority – the slaves – had no rights at all. I recently received a letter, which compares slave society unfavourably to barbarism. I reproduce an extract:

> *"Actually primitive societies are the least barbaric in world history. For instance, their wars were/are mostly ritual with almost no victims. The barbarism of Nazism and the Balkan wars is a typical feature of capitalism, just like feudalism or slave society had their typical barbaric features. The most barbarous facts in history are all in one way or another consequences of class society."*

The above lines pose the question of war not in a materialist but in a *moralistic* sense. War has always been barbaric. It is about killing people in the most efficient manner. One can readily agree that the wars of primitive societies killed far fewer people than modern wars. That is to a great extent because the development of science and technique have led to a perfection of human productivity, not only in industry and agriculture, but also on the battlefield. Engels explains in *Anti-Dühring* how the history of warfare can only be understood in terms of the development of the means of production. The Romans were a lot more efficient at killing people than the barbarians (at least in the period of ascent of Roman power), and we are incomparably more efficient than the Romans in this sphere, and many others besides.

Marxists cannot look at history from the point of view of morality. Apart from anything else, there is no such thing as a supra-historical morality. Every society has its own morality, religion, culture, etc., which correspond to a given level of development, and, at least in the period we call civilisation, also to the interests of a particular class. Whether a particular war was good, bad or indifferent cannot be ascertained from the point of view of the number of victims, and much less from an abstract moral standpoint. We may strongly disapprove of wars in general, but one thing cannot be denied: throughout the whole course of human history, all serious questions have ultimately been settled in this way. That goes both for the conflicts between nations (wars) and also the conflicts between classes (revolutions).

Nor can our attitude towards a particular type of society and its culture be determined by moralistic considerations. From the standpoint of historical materialism it is a matter of complete indifference that some barbarians (including, it seems, my own ancestors, the ancient Celts) were head-hunters who burned people alive inside large wicker statues to celebrate midsummer's day. That is no more reason to condemn them than the fact that they also produced fine jewellery and declaimed poetry can be used to praise them. What determines whether a given socio-economic formation is historically progressive or not is first and foremost its ability to develop the productive forces – the real material basis upon which all human culture arises and develops.

The reason why human development was so painfully slow for such a long period of time was precisely the very low level of development of the productive forces. The real development begins already in the phase of barbarism, as explained above. This was a progressive development in its day, but was overtaken, negated and superseded by a higher form that was slavery. Old Hegel, that wonderfully profound thinker, writes: "It was not so much *from* slavery as *through* slavery that humanity was emancipated."[3]

The Romans utilised brute force to subjugate other peoples, sold entire cities into slavery, slaughtered thousands of prisoners of war for amusement in the public circus, and introduced such refined methods of execution as crucifixion. Yes, all that is perfectly true. And yet, when we come to consider where all our modern civilisation, our culture, our literature, our architecture, our medicine, our science, our philosophy, even in many cases our language, comes from, the answer is – from Greece and Rome.

It is not a difficult task to read out a long list of the crimes of the Romans (or the feudal lords or the modern-day capitalists). It is even possible to compare them unfavourably, at least in some respects, to the barbarian tribes against which they were more-or-less constantly at war. This is not new. In fact, you can read numerous passages in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus who, does precisely that. But it does not carry us a single step forward in our understanding of history. Only by consistently applying

Image: Public domain

"The great slave rising under Spartacus was a glorious episode in the history of antiquity. The echoes of this titanic uprising reverberate down the centuries and is still a source of inspiration."

the method of historical materialism is this possible.

THE RISE AND FALL OF ROME

Although the labour of the individual slave was not very productive (slaves must be compelled to work), the aggregate of large numbers of slaves, as in the mines and *latifundia* (large-scale agricultural units) in Rome in the last period of the Republic and the Empire, produced a considerable surplus. At the height of the Empire, slaves were plentiful and cheap and the wars of Rome were basically slave hunts on a massive scale. But at a certain stage this system reached its limits and then entered into a lengthy period of decline.

The beginnings of a crisis in Rome can already be observed in the latter period of the Republic, a period characterised by acute social and political upheavals and class war. From the earliest beginnings there was a violent struggle between rich and poor in Rome. There are detailed accounts in the writings of Livy and others of the struggles between Plebeians and Patricians, which ended in an uneasy compromise. At a later period, when Rome had already made herself mistress of the Mediterranean by the defeat of her most powerful rival Carthage, we saw what was in effect a struggle for the division of the spoils.

Tiberius Gracchus demanded that the wealth of Rome be divided up among its free citizens. His aim was to make Italy a republic of small farmers and not slaves, but he was defeated by the nobles and slaveholders. This was a disaster for Rome in the long run. The ruined peasantry – the backbone of the Republic and its army – drifted to Rome, where they constituted a *lumpen-proletariat*, a non-productive class, living off dole from the state. Although resentful of the rich, they nevertheless shared a common interest in the exploitation of the slaves – the only really productive class in the period of the Republic and the Empire.

The great slave rising under Spartacus was a glorious episode in the history of antiquity. The echoes of this titanic uprising reverberate down the centuries and is still a source of inspiration. The spectacle of these most downtrodden people rising up with arms in hand and inflicting defeat after defeat on the armies of the world's greatest power is one of the most incredible events in history. Had they succeeded in overthrowing the Roman state, the course of history would have been significantly altered.

Of course, it is not possible to say exactly what the outcome would have been. Undoubtedly the slaves would have been freed. Given the level of development of the productive forces, the general tendency could only have been in the direction of some kind of feudalism. But at least humanity would have been spared the horrors of the Dark Ages, and it is likely that economic and cultural development would have proceeded more quickly.

The basic reason why Spartacus failed in the end was the fact that the slaves did not link up with the proletariat in the towns. So long as the latter continued to support the state, the victory of the slaves was impossible. But the Roman proletariat, unlike the modern proletariat, was not a productive but a purely parasitical class, living off the labour of the slaves and dependent on their masters. The failure of the Roman revolution is rooted in this fact.

Marx and Engels point out that the class struggle eventually ends either in the total victory of one of the classes, *or else in the common ruin of the contending classes*. The fate of Roman society is the clearest example of the latter case. The defeat of the slaves led straight to the ruin of the Roman state. In the absence of a free peasantry, the state was obliged to rely on a mercenary army to fight its wars. The deadlock in the class struggle produced a situation similar to the more modern phenomenon of Bonapartism. The Roman equivalent is what we call Caesarism.

The Roman legionnaire was no longer loyal to the Republic but to his commander – the man who guaranteed his pay, his loot and a plot of land when he retired. The last period of the Republic is characterised by an intensification of the struggle between the classes, in which neither side was able to win a decisive victory. As a result, the state (which Lenin described as "armed bodies of men") began to acquire increasing independence, to raise itself above society and to appear as the final arbiter in the continuing power struggles in Rome.

A whole series of military adventurers appears: Marius, Crassus, Pompey, and lastly Julius Caesar, a general of brilliance, a clever politician and a shrewd businessman, who in effect put an end to the Republic whilst paying lip-service to it. His prestige boosted by his military triumphs in Gaul, Spain and Britain, he began to concentrate all power in his hands. Although he was assassinated by a conservative faction that wished to preserve the Republic, the old regime was doomed.

In his play *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare says of Brutus: "This was the noblest Roman of them all." Certainly, Brutus and the other conspirators who killed Caesar did not lack personal courage, and their motives may or not have been noble. But they were hopeless utopians. The republic that they tried to defend had been a rotten corpse for a long time. After Brutus and the others were defeated by the triumvirate, the Republic was formally recognised, and this pretence was kept up by the first Emperor, Augustus. The very title 'Emperor' (*imperator* in Latin) is a military title, invented to avoid the title of king that was so offensive to republican ears. But a king he was, in all but name.

Image: Public domain

Julius Caesar.

The forms of the old Republic survived for a long time after that. But they were just that – hollow forms with no real content, an empty husk that in the end could be blown away by the wind. The Senate was devoid of all real power and authority. Julius Caesar had shocked respectable public opinion by making a Gaul a member of the senate. Caligula considerably improved upon this by making his horse a senator. Nobody saw anything wrong with this, or if they did, they kept their mouths firmly shut.

The emperors continued to 'consult' the senate, and even contrived not to laugh out loud when so doing. In the last period of the Empire, when, as a result of the decline of production, corruption and looting, the finances were in a lamentable state, wealthy Romans were regularly 'promoted' to the rank of senator in order to extract extra taxes from them. One such reluctant legislator was said by some Roman humourist to have been "banished into the senate".

It often happens in history that outworn institutions can survive long after their reason to exist has disappeared. They drag out a miserable existence like a decrepit old man who clings onto life, until they are swept away by a revolution. The decline of the Roman empire lasted for nearly four centuries. This was not an uninterrupted process. There were periods of recovery and even brilliance, but the general line was downwards.

In periods like this, there is a general sense of malaise. The predominant mood is one of scepticism, lack of faith and pessimism in the future. The old traditions, morality and religion – things that act as a powerful cement holding society together – lose their credibility. In place of the old religion, people seek out new gods. In its period of decline, Rome was inundated with a plague of religious sects from the east. Christianity was only one of these, and although ultimately successful, had to contend with numerous rivals, such as the cult of Mithras.

When people feel that the world in which they live is tottering, that they have lost all control over their existence, that their lives and destinies are determined by unseen forces, then mystical and irrational tendencies get the upper hand. People believe that the end of the world is nigh. The early Christians believed this fervently, but many others suspected it. In point of fact, what was coming to an end was not the world but only a particular form of society – slave society. The success of Christianity was rooted in the fact that it connected with this general mood. The world was evil and sinful. It was necessary to turn one's back on the world and all its works and look forward to another life after death.

In fact, these ideas were already foreshadowed by philosophical tendencies in Rome. When men and women lose all hope in existing society, they have two options: either to try to arrive at a rational understanding of what is happening in order to fight to change society, or else to turn their back on society altogether. In the period of decline, Roman philosophy was dominated by subjectivism – stoicism and scepticism. Proceeding from a different angle, Epicurus taught people to seek happiness and learn to live without fear. It is a sublime philosophy, but in the given context, could only appeal to the more intelligent sections of the privileged classes. Finally, the Neo-Platonist philosophy of Plotinus verges on overt mysticism and superstition, eventually providing a philosophical justification for Christianity.

By the time the barbarians invaded, the whole structure was on the verge of collapse, not only economically, but morally and spiritually. No wonder the barbarians were welcomed as liberators by the slaves and poorer sections of society. They merely completed a job that had been well prepared in advance. *The barbarian attacks were an historical accident that served to express an historical necessity.*

WHY THE BARBARIANS TRIUMPHED

How was it possible for a highly developed culture to be so easily overcome by a more backward and primitive one? The seeds of Rome's destruction were sown long before the barbarian invasions. The basic contradiction of the slave economy is that it was, paradoxically, based on *a low productivity of labour*. Slave labour is only productive when it is employed on massive scale. The prior condition for this is an ample supply of slaves at a low cost. Since slaves breed very slowly in captivity, the only way a sufficient supply of slaves can be guaranteed is through continuous warfare. Once the Empire had reached the limits of its expansion under Hadrian, this became increasingly difficult.

Once the Empire reached its limits and the contradictions inherent in slavery began to assert themselves, Rome entered into a long period of decline that lasted more than four hundred years, until it was eventually overrun by the barbarians. The mass migrations that brought about the collapse of the Empire were a common

phenomenon among nomadic pastoral peoples in antiquity and occurred for a variety of reasons – pressure on pasture-land as a result of population growth, climate changes, etc.

In this case, the more settled peoples of the western steppes and eastern Europe were driven from their lands by pressure from more backward nomadic tribes living to the east, the Hsiung-nu, better known to us as the Huns. Did these barbarians possess a culture? Yes, they possessed a kind of culture, as every people from the dawn of history had a culture. The Huns had no knowledge of agriculture, but their horde was a formidable fighting machine. Their cavalry had no equal in the world at that time. It was said of them that their country was the back of a horse.

However, unfortunately for Europe, the Huns in the fourth century came up against a more advanced culture, a civilisation that knew the art of building, lived in towns and cities, and possessed a disciplined army – China. The fighting prowess of these dreaded warriors from the Mongolian steppes was no match for the civilised Chinese, who built the Great Wall – a formidable engineering feat – to keep them out.

Defeated by the Chinese, the Huns turned westwards, leaving behind them a trail of appalling destruction and devastation. Passing through what is now Russia, they clashed with the Goths in present-day Romania in 355 AD. Although the Gothic tribes stood on a higher level of development than the Huns, they were cut to pieces and forced to flee westwards. The survivors – some 80,000 desperate men, women and children on primitive wagons – came up against the frontiers of the Roman Empire at a time when the decline of slave society had reached a point where its capacity to defend itself was severely weakened. The Visigoths (western Goths), who stood on a lower level of development than the Romans, nevertheless defeated them. The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus described this clash of two alien worlds as "the most disastrous Roman defeat since Cannae."[4]

With remarkable swiftness most of the towns were laid waste and abandoned. It is true that this process did not start with the barbarians. The decay of the slave economy, the monstrously oppressive nature of the Empire with its bloated bureaucracy and predatory tax farmers, was already undermining the whole system. There was a steady drift to the countryside where the basis was already being laid for the development of a different mode of production – feudalism. The barbarians merely delivered the *coup de grâce* to a rotten and moribund system.

Image: Public domain

Attila and the Huns by Georges Rochegrosse depicts a Roman villa in Gaul sacked.

The whole edifice was tottering, and they merely gave it a last and violent push.

The seemingly impregnable Roman line along the Danube and Rhine buckled and collapsed. At a certain stage, different barbarian tribes, including the Huns, converged in a united onslaught against Rome. The Gothic chieftain Alaric (who, incidentally was an Arian Christian and a former Roman mercenary) led 40,000 Goths, Huns and freed slaves across the Julian Alps and eight years later sacked Rome itself. Although Alaric, who seems to have been a relatively enlightened person, tried to spare the citizens of Rome, he could not control the Huns and freed slaves, who gave themselves up to murder, plunder and rape. Priceless pieces of sculpture were destroyed and works of art were melted down for their precious metals. This was only the beginning. In the following centuries, successive waves of barbarians swept out of the east: Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Alans, Lombards, Suevi, Alemanni, Burgundians, Franks, Thuringians, Frisians, Heruli, Gepidae, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Huns and Magyars, pushed their way into Europe. The all-powerful and eternal Empire was reduced to ashes.

WAS CIVILISATION THROWN BACK?

Is it correct to say that the overthrow of the Roman Empire by the barbarians threw human civilisation back? Despite the recent noisy campaign by the 'Friends of Barbarism Society', there can be no doubt about this, and it can easily be demonstrated with facts and figures. *The immediate effect of the barbarian onslaught was to wipe out civilisation and throw society and human thought back for a thousand years.*

The productive forces suffered a violent interruption. The cities were destroyed or abandoned as people fled to the land in search of food. As even our old friend Rudgley is forced to admit: "The only architectural remains left by the Huns are the ashes of the cities that they burned." And not just the Huns. The first act of the Goths was to burn the city of Mainz to the ground. Why did they do this? Why did they not simply occupy it? The answer is related to the backward stage of economic development of the invaders. They were an agricultural people and knew nothing of towns and cities. The barbarians in general were hostile to the towns and their inhabitants (a psychology that is quite common among peasants in all periods).

St. Jerome describes the results of this devastation when he writes:

> *"That in those desert countries nothing was left except the sky and the earth; that after the destruction of the cities and the extirpation of the human race, the land was overgrown with thick forests and inextricable brambles; and that universal desolation, announced by the prophet Zephaniah, was accomplished in the scarcity of the beasts, the birds and even of the fish."*[5]

These lines were written 20 years after the death of Valens the emperor, when the barbarian invasions started. They describe the state of affairs in Jerome's native province, Pannonia (present-day Hungary) where successive waves of invaders caused death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. In the end, Pannonia was completely depopulated and later occupied by the Huns, and finally the present-day population of Magyars. This process of devastation, rape and pillage was to continue for centuries, leaving behind a terrible heritage of backwardness – in fact, of *barbarism* – which we call the Dark Ages. Let us give just one quote:

> *"The Dark Ages were stark in every dimension. Famines and plagues, culminating in the Black Death and its recurring pandemics, repeatedly thinned the population. Rickets affected the survivors. Extraordinary*

> "Capitalism has long ago ceased to play any progressive role, and has become a monstrous obstacle to further development. This obstacle must be removed if humanity is to go forward."

climatic changes brought storms and floods, which turned into major disasters because the empire's drainage system, like most of the imperial infrastructure, was no longer functioning. It says much about the Middle Ages that, in the year 1500, after a thousand years of neglect, the roads built by the Romans were still the best on the continent. Most of the others were in such a state of disrepair that they were unusable; so were all European harbours until the eighteenth century, when commerce again began to stir. Among the lost arts was bricklaying; in all of Germany, England, Holland, and Scandinavia, virtually no stone buildings, except cathedrals, were raised for ten centuries. The serfs' basic agricultural tools were picks, forks, rakes, scythes, and balanced sickles. Because there was very little iron, there were no wheeled ploughshares with moldboards. The lack of ploughs was not a major problem in the south, where farmers could pulverise the light Mediterranean soils, but the heavier earth in northern Europe had to be sliced, moved and turned by hand. Although horses and oxen were available, they were of limited use. The horse collar, harness, and stirrup did not exist until about 900 AD. Therefore, tandem hitching was impossible. Peasants laboured harder, sweated more, and collapsed from exhaustion more often than their animals."[6]

The rise of the feudal system following the collapse of Rome was accompanied by a long period of cultural stagnation in all Europe to the west of the Pyrenees. With the exception of two inventions: the water wheel and windmills, there were no real inventions for about over 1,000 years. *In other words, there was a complete eclipse of culture.* This was a result of the collapse of the productive forces, upon which culture ultimately depends. Failure to understand this makes a scientific understanding of history completely impossible.

Human thought, art, science and culture were reduced to the most primitive level, and only experienced a relative recovery when the ideas of the Greeks and Romans were introduced into medieval Europe – by the Arabs. True, the knot of history was retied again in the period we call the Renaissance. The slow recovery of trade led to the rise of the bourgeoisie and a revival of the towns, notably in Flanders, Holland and northern Italy. But it is an actual fact that civilisation was thrown back for a thousand years. That is what we mean by a descending line in history. And let nobody imagine that such a thing cannot recur.

SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM

The whole of human history consists precisely in the struggle of humankind to raise itself above the animal level. This long struggle began seven million years ago, when our remote humanoid ancestors first stood upright and were able to free their hands for manual labour. The production of the first stone scrapers and hand axes was the beginning of a process whereby men and women made themselves human through labour. Ever since then, successive phases of social development have arisen on the basis of changes in the development of the productive force of labour – that is to say, of our power over nature.

For most of human history, this process has been painfully slow, as the *Economist* remarked on the eve of the new millennium:

> *"For nearly all of human history, economic advance has been so slow as to be imperceptible within the span of a lifetime. For century after century, the annual rate of economic growth was, to one place of decimals, zero. When growth did happen it was so slow as to be invisible to contemporaries – and even in retrospect it appears not as rising living standards (which is what growth means today), merely as a gentle rise in population. Down the millennia, progress, for all but a tiny elite, amounted to this: it slowly became possible for more people to live, at the meanest level of subsistence."*[7]

The relation between the development of human culture and the productive forces was already clear to that great genius of antiquity, Aristotle, who explained in his book *The Metaphysics* that *"man begins to philosophise when the means of life are provided,"* and added that the reason why astronomy and mathematics were discovered in Egypt is that the priest caste did not have to work. This is a purely materialist understanding of history. It is the complete answer to all the nonsense of the utopians who imagine that life would be splendid if only we could "go back to nature" – that is, go back to an animal level of existence.

The possibility of real socialism depends on the development of the means of production to a level far in excess of even the most developed capitalist societies, like the USA, Germany or Japan. This was explained by Marx even before he wrote the *Communist Manifesto.* In the *German Ideology* he wrote that "where want is generalised all the old crap revives." And by "all the old crap", he meant class oppression, inequality and exploitation. The reason why the October Revolution degenerated into Stalinism was that it remained isolated in a backward country where the material conditions for building socialism were absent.

Despite the fact that capitalism is the most exploitative and oppressive system that has ever existed; despite the fact that, in Marx's words, "Capital came onto the stage of history dripping blood from every pore," it nevertheless represented a colossal leap forward in the development of the productive forces – and therefore of our power over nature. The development of industry, agriculture, science and technology transformed the planet and laid the basis for a complete revolution that for the first time will make us free human beings.

We have emerged from savagery, barbarism, slavery and feudalism, and each of these stages represented a definite stage in the development of the productive forces and culture. The bud disappears when the flower blossoms and we may consider that as a negation, one thing contradicting the other. But in point of fact, these are necessary stages, and must be taken in their unity. It is absurd to deny the historical role of barbarism, or any other stage of human development. But history moves on.

Every phase of human development has its roots in all previous development. This is true both of human evolution and social development. We have evolved from lower species and are genetically related to even the most primitive life forms, as the human genome has conclusively proved. We are separated from our nearest living relatives the chimpanzees by a genetic difference of less than two percent. But that very small percentage represents a tremendous qualitative leap.

In the same way, the development of capitalism has now laid the basis for a new and qualitatively higher (yes, *higher*) stage of human development, which we call socialism. The present crisis on a

world scale is nothing but a reflection of the fact that the development of the productive forces is coming into conflict with the straitjacket of private ownership and the nation state. Capitalism has long ago ceased to play any progressive role, and has become a monstrous obstacle to further development. This obstacle must be removed if humanity is to go forward. And if it is not removed in time, a terrible threat hangs over the heads of the human race.

The embryo of a new society is already maturing within the womb of the old. The elements of a workers' democracy already exist in the form of the workers' organisations, the shop stewards' committees, the trade unions, the co-operatives etc. In the period that opens up, there will be a life and death struggle – a struggle of those elements of the new society to be born, and an equally fierce resistance on the part of the old order to prevent this from happening.

At a certain stage this conflict – which can already be seen in outline in the general strikes in Europe, the revolutionary movements in Argentina and other Latin American countries, and the revolt of the youth everywhere – will reach a critical point. No ruling class in history has ever given up its power and privileges without a ferocious struggle. The crisis of capitalism represents not just an economic crisis that threatens the jobs and living standards of millions of people throughout the world. It also threatens the very basis of a civilised existence – insofar as this exists. It threatens to throw humankind back on all fronts. If the proletariat – the only genuinely revolutionary class – does not succeed in overthrowing the rule of the banks and monopolies, the stage will be set for a collapse of culture and even a return to barbarism.

In fact, for most people in the West (and not only in the West) the most obvious and painful manifestations of the crisis of capitalism are not economic but those phenomena that affect their personal lives at the most sensitive and emotional points: the breakdown of the family, the epidemic of crime and violence, the collapse of the old values and morality with nothing to put in their place, the constant outbreak of wars – all of this gives rise to a sense of instability, a lack of faith in the present or the future. These are the symptoms of the impasse of capitalism, which in the last analysis (but only in the last analysis) is a result of the revolt of the productive forces against the straitjacket of private property and the nation state.

It was Marx who pointed out that there were two possibilities before the human race: *socialism or barbarism*. Formal democracy, which the workers of Europe and the USA regard as something normal, is actually a very fragile structure that will not survive an open showdown between the classes. The 'cultured' bourgeoisie will not hesitate to move in the direction of dictatorship in the future. And beneath the thin layer of culture and modern civilisation, there are forces that resemble barbarism at its worst. The recent events in the Balkans are a stark reminder of this. Civilized norms can easily break down and the demons of a long-forgotten past can overwhelm even the most civilised nation. Yes, indeed, history knows a descending line as well as an ascending one!

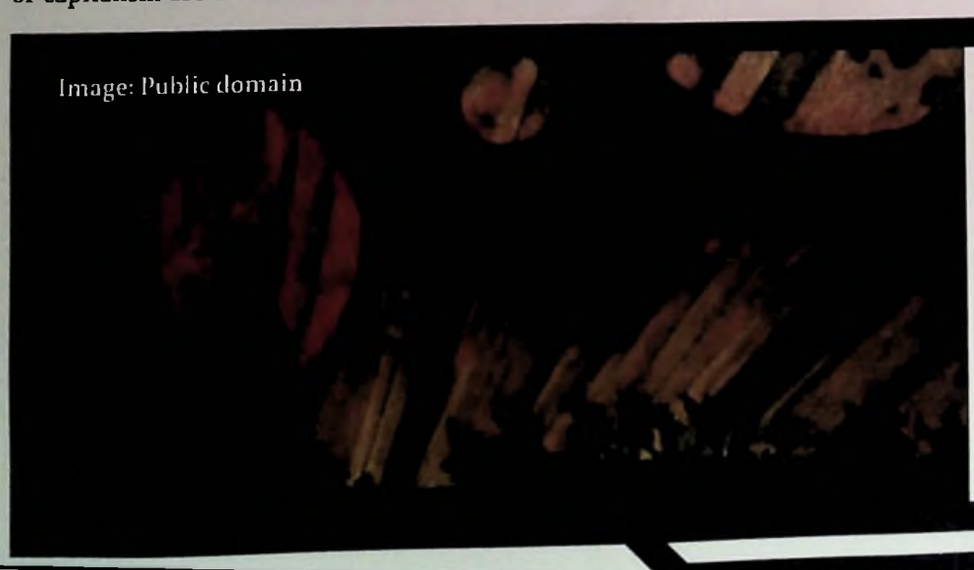
The question is therefore posed in the starkest terms: in the coming period, either the working class will take into its hands the running of society, replacing the decrepit capitalist system with a new social order based on the harmonious and rational planning of the productive forces and the conscious control of men and women over their own lives and destinies, or else we will be faced with a most frightful spectacle of social, economic and cultural collapse.

For thousands of years, culture has been the monopoly of a privileged minority, while the great majority of humanity was excluded from knowledge, science, art and government. Even now, this remains the case. Despite all our pretensions, we are not really civilised. Our world does not merit the name. It is a barbaric world, inhabited by people who have yet to overcome a barbarous past. Life remains a harsh and unrelenting struggle to exist for the great majority of the planet, not only in the underdeveloped world but in the developed capitalist countries.

However, historical materialism does not incline us to draw pessimistic conclusions, but on the contrary. The general tendency of human history has been in the direction of ever greater development of our productive and cultural potential. The great achievements of the last hundred years have for the first time created a situation where all the problems facing humankind can easily be solved. The potential for a classless society already exists on a world scale. What is necessary is to bring about a rational and harmonious planning of the productive forces in order that this immense, practically infinite, potential can be realised.

On the basis of a real revolution in production, it would be possible to achieve such a level of abundance that men and women would no longer have to worry about their everyday necessities. The humiliating concerns and fears that fill every thinking hour of men and women now will disappear. For the first time, free human beings will be masters of their destinies. For the first time, they will be really human. Only then will the real history of the human race begin. ■

1 Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, p. 69
2 G. Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 64
3 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 407
4 Ammianus, xxxi, 13
5 Quoted in Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 3, p. 49
6 William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire*, pp. 5-6
7 *The Economist*, December 31, 1999



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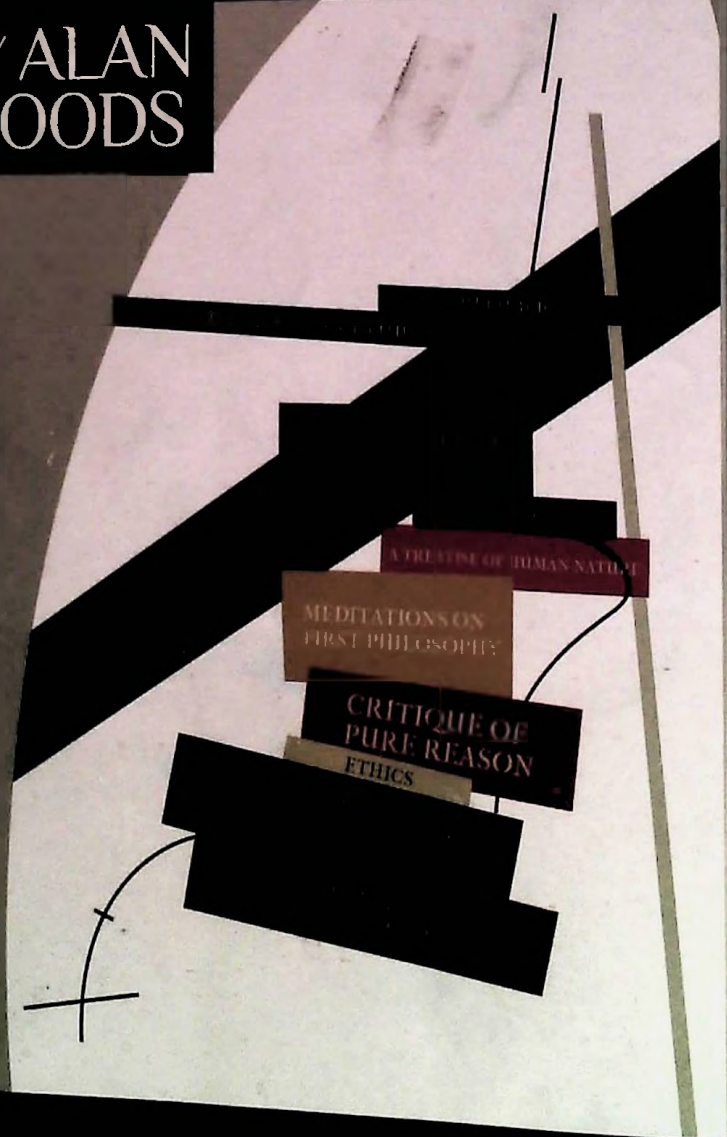
"It was Marx who pointed out that there were two possibilities before the human race: socialism or barbarism."

In defence of
MARXISM

THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE
BY ALAN WOODS



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